MONSTROUS
A NOVELLA
WYN
LILY MAYNE

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Beta-reading and proofreading by Kate Wood Proofreading

Warning: *This m/m love story contains explicit sexual content and is not suitable for young readers. It also contains graphic depictions of torture and violence, and mentions PTSD.*

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Message from the Author

If you haven’t already read books one to three of the Monstrous series, there are big spoilers in this novella. Please, at the very least, read books one and two of the series before reading this so nothing is ruined for you.

Monstrous
Reading Order

Soul Eater: Book One
Edin: Book Two
The Rycke: Book Three
Wyn: Novella

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PROLOGUE

The teeming mass in front of me writhed like a beast with a thousand legs. The creatures that shoved and bit and clawed their way were frantic in their desperation to get through, to flood into a new place where the scent of hot blood was thick and a glut of living things waited.

Of course, *I* had been going through for millennia. I'd been visiting this other world for eons, destroying the parasites that slipped through and infected humanity. I'd been using this tear between our worlds—this largely secret, unknown rip in our world fabric—for almost longer than I could remember.

Which meant I wasn't overly happy with all these fucking things using *my* tear to clamber their way through now.

The mass of howling, shoving, clawing beasts parted as I silently made my way through the valley toward the jagged slash of shimmering air. They moved seamlessly out of my way like I was an opposing force, flowing back and making my walk far more pleasant.

I cocked my head as I approached the tear. It had grown. Substantially.

Once a narrow sliver in the air, a barely perceptible wave of energy, now it was gaping. The low hum had become a thunderous roar.

And creatures were pouring through it, from this world into that one. I could already hear a wailing chorus of human screams rising from the other side.

What would they think of it? The creatures from this place. What would they think of blue sky and green grass and a seemingly never-ending supply of soft, weak, thin-skinned prey?

Humans were stupid. It was why the parasites could easily overrun them if left unchecked. It was why they were totally, blissfully ignorant of the existence of anything outside of their little world.

And it was why this was going to quickly devolve into a murderous, rampaging bloodbath. A mindless killing spree on both sides. That was assuming humanity could scramble fast enough to fight back against the bigger and deadlier creatures that looked eager to make their way through.

I turned my head to look over my shoulder, toward the top of the valley. I could see the vast, dark outline of the rycke's wings, twitching gently as

he watched from his lonely perch. He would come through, but not until all this chaos had died down. Ryckes created their own chaos. They did not enjoy that of others.

I turned back to look at the tear, the sea of creatures in front of me parting to stay out of my way, except for those who were already tumbling through and vanishing with a ripple.

I sighed. It wasn't quite time for me to go back yet. The hunt wasn't due. I had been disturbed from my rest by this cacophony of feverish hunger, and had only come here to see what was drawing creatures from all over the area to this valley. Now I knew.

I wondered if the other tears that were used by the rest of those like me had also grown. If this was happening all across our world, and theirs. I reached out with my cluttered mind, sifting through all the noise until I could sense the one closest who was awake.

Has the tear you use gotten bigger? I asked Orlith, watching with disinterest as a meek flock of myrms skittered through and vanished. Even their natural predators left them alone, too distracted by the prospect of new meat.

His voice rang through my head a few moments later. *Yes. I'm watching an exodus as we speak.*

Me too. I cocked my head again. *Are you going through to see how the humans react?*

I could practically feel Orlith rolling his eyes. *By 'see how they react', do you mean 'see how many ways a human can die'? It will be chaos. I'll wait until our next hunt to witness the aftermath. Maybe there won't even be enough humans left to be infected soon.*

I huffed. *Good point. Let's wait for the dust to settle.*

With that, I turned to walk back out of the valley. To finish my rest until the pressing buzz of too many parasites impinged on my subconscious, waking me, telling me it was time to once again start the hunt.

The creatures at my back converged in a rush, filling the space I left, once again clambering over each other to get to the new world.

The rycke still watched from his solitary perch, eyes big and dark and sombre, but he wasn't my concern. None of them were my concern.

We'd see just how well the humans fared against us all.

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CHAPTER ONE

Twenty years later

This was still a novelty to me. Lounging around in a soft, decadent bed. Doing nothing for the sake of it, instead of hunting or retreating to my nest to sleep until the next wave of parasites became too big and unruly.

Danny was turning me into a lazy nask. Those fat, ugly little creatures slept for decades at a time in my world, waking only to eat whatever was closest and find another nask to engage in the least enthusiastic mating dance I'd ever seen.

That didn't mean I was inclined to get up, though. Not when we had stopped to rest in a disgustingly large house somewhere in Kansas—which had admittedly comfortable beds—and my sweet human was currently humming to himself while he rifled through the nightstand as I watched. It helped that he was wearing nothing but tight grey boxer briefs.

I dragged my eyes up from his backside when he spoke.

"Do you think a celebrity lived here?" he asked, squinting at the framed photograph in his hands. "I feel like I recognise this dude, but…"

I shrugged one shoulder, rolling onto my back and stretching. "It's a big, ridiculous house. So maybe."

"Isn't this that old actress who was in all those horror movies? My momma liked her." He turned the photo in my direction.

I flicked my gaze over it with little interest. "I have no idea. All humans are just bags of meat and bones, anyway."

Danny dropped the frame back on the nightstand and shot me an adorable scowl, just like I knew he would. "I'm just a bag of meat and bones, am I?"

I grabbed him, tugging him down until he was sprawled on top of me. My skin tingled at the feel of his long, supple limbs tangling with mine. "No. You are different." I turned us so I was looming over him on the bed, and lowered my head to kiss him.

"I mean, I *am* just a bag of meat and bones, though," he said when the kiss ended long moments later. He grinned up at me. "Plain old human. Not like you, Father Time." He poked me in the stomach.

I huffed and kissed him again to shut him up. So maybe I was a *little* self-conscious about the age difference between us. Not that I was old. Or at least, I wasn't particularly old in terms of my species. I was more like… middle-aged. Maybe. It wasn't something we thought about. Age became fairly irrelevant to beings who lived for so long.

For humans though, who were so short-lived and fragile and easily destroyed, age was their way of keeping track of their mortality. I tried not to think about it often. Because once I started, some foreign emotion like panic began to fill up every inch of me, and I struggled to push it back down.

Sometimes I could think of nothing else. Nothing but the knowledge that I would outlive him, and it made my insides feel like they were being ripped apart. Sometimes I looked at him and was flooded with dread when I thought of the day that I would start seeing the black cloak of death creeping into the edges of his aura, getting closer every minute. When his body would weaken and visibly deteriorate, and there would be nothing I could do.

I tried to push the thoughts away, but they consumed me sometimes. Worry pounded through me like a war drum. Deep and constant, inescapable. Thankfully, the state I went into while Danny slept was more meditative, which meant my head remained blissfully blank for those few hours. Even without the dark thoughts, my mind was a cluttered place after living for so long, so I was grateful for the reprieve. Sometimes though, I simply lay awake next to him, breathing in his scent, my blood pounding with the awareness that I would have him for so short a time.

He was so fragile. So vulnerable. I ached to think of him being hurt or sick again. I couldn't even bring myself to consider what would happen when he was no longer here, and I was left alone again. Without him.

I was used to being alone, but this would be different. This would ruin me. I already knew it.

A faint, buzzing voice—one that had been sneaking into my mind for weeks now—returned with my melancholy thoughts. Reminding me of a place I'd long forgotten, back beyond the tear, where lovers went to share the time they each had left. Lifespans varied so much in my world, and it was seen as a great sacrifice for a being to give half of their lifetime to another.

I had never been. Never given it much thought, because I had no reason to care about how much or little time I had, and no one to share it with. My time had been mine, and it would end when it ended.

Now, though… Now I had someone to share it with. Now I had someone whose lifetime was shorter than mine. Much shorter.

I broke the kiss and stared down at Danny, thinking hard. My eyes roamed over every inch of him as they always did, greedily drinking him in. His soft, short dark hair—which I was much better at cutting for him now. Bright blue eyes, like the summer sky in this world. My chest ached at the bump on his nose that made it slightly crooked. I often kissed that bump, because it made Danny smile up at me with such love. Like he was still as grateful that he was with me as I was, even after all we'd gone through to get here.

His jaw was smooth, because he'd shaved earlier, but I knew by tonight it would be scratchy again, and I loved the feel of it on my skin. I could see the little dent of a scar on his chin that he'd told me he got as a child when he was running and tripped, slamming chin-first into the ground. My chest grew warm when I thought about a tiny, clumsy Danny getting himself into scrapes and being consoled by his mother, who I knew he loved very much. That little scar grew more prominent when he smiled, and I liked to nuzzle at it while I breathed in the scent of his throat.

"That's your scary thinking face." Danny's voice drew me out of my cluttered brain as he reached up and cupped my cheeks. "What's up?"

I thought of that place again, beyond the tear. My world was very, very different to this one. It would be alien to Danny. Probably frightening.

I blinked, taking one more look at my sweet human beneath me. My black eye told me he was whole and healthy and full of vitality, the aura around him achingly familiar. Beautiful, like him. I'd once despised the eye that let me see death creeping up on people, infecting them with darkness. But I was grateful for the ability now, because it eased some of the worry that simmered constantly in my gut for my vulnerable human.

My blood still went cold when I thought back to how close death had gotten to Danny. When he'd lain unconscious for two days, after I had taken him from the military base where they'd tortured him. The darkness of it had made his outline hazy for the first few hours that I had watched him in that motel room, despairing and useless and disgustingly ignorant of how to care for him. I'd spent that silent, agonising time reading every single

leaflet that came with the human medicine we had collected. I had considered going and stealing a doctor from one of the human cities, but I hadn't wanted to leave him.

Even as I had cared for him and treated his wounds, I panicked internally that I was doing something wrong, that I was making it worse. Luckily, I somehow hadn't, and Danny's aura had slowly returned to its usual vibrancy, full of life.

Would it stay that way beyond the tear? If we went?

"Wyn?" Danny wrapped his arms around my neck and tugged gently at my hair. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong." I gave him a kiss, then another, unable to stop myself. "I just love you."

I said it to make him smile, and it worked. Danny grinned up at me as he clasped my face between his hands, thumbs absently tracing the thin, raised ridges across my cheekbones. I shuddered at the feeling. I was sensitive there.

"I love you too, Soul Eater."

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CHAPTER TWO

“You’re staring again.”

My fingers twitched. I forced myself to drag my gaze away and instead glare with disinterest at the sloping, overgrown fields beyond the deck of the house. Then I huffed. Why was I looking at this when I could be looking at Danny?

My eyes slid back to him. “You can’t even tell. My hood is up,” I told him, unable to mask the hint of sulkiness in my voice.

Danny snorted, glancing back at me as he finished his dinner—one of the many MREs I often stole for him from military bases, slipping in and out with ease whenever I wanted. They really hadn’t learned their lessons from the Nebraska incident. Honestly, they were lucky I wasn’t quite as murderous as they all thought.

Danny’s voice cut through my drifting thoughts. “You think I can’t feel you looking at me?”

“Well, why can’t I look at you?” I countered, crossing my arms over my chest and sprawling back in my seat, knees spread wide and boots planted on the ground. Danny called it my BDE pose. I had no idea what that meant, but it normally succeeded in making him come and give me some attention.

It worked.

“You can look at me all you want.” Danny abandoned the last of his dinner and came over to straddle my lap. My fingers twitched before they palmed his firm thighs, sliding up to his hips. My lips started to curl as I tilted my head so I could look up at him, hood slipping back enough that I knew my chin and mouth were visible. I held back the smile. I was still wary of Danny being put off by my sharp teeth, which were nothing like a human’s.

“I know when you’re stewing, Wyn.” Danny grasped my shoulders and looked down at me. “Will you tell me?”

My fingers tightened on his hips. I stared up at him for long moments, my insides twisting with—not nerves. I didn’t get nervous. But… apprehension. About making the wrong decision.

“If you… If we could be together for longer, would you… want that?” I asked him, wanting to grit my teeth when my voice came out edged with uncertainty.

I still had no idea why Danny loved me.

“Huh?” He gave me an odd look.

“If there was a way for us to have more time together.” I tried to clarify. “A way to extend your life. Would you want that?”

Danny stared at me, jaw slack. “Extend my life?” he echoed, unsure. “Do you mean like, by a few years? A decade?”

I shook my head. “Thousands.”

Danny made a choked sound. “*Thousands*? *Thousands* of years?” He swallowed, face suddenly pale, and looked around. “I feel like—This is kind of a heavy topic to discuss while it looks like I’m giving you a lap dance.”

He clambered off my lap with endearing awkwardness, but I stood up and grabbed his hand before he could get far. “I’m sorry. I should have been more tactful.”

“No, it’s okay.” Danny turned to face me and took my other hand in his as well. “I want to know. How would it be possible?”

I tried to think of how to explain it. “There’s a place in my world where we can… tether our lives. It means that the years we each have left become ours. Both of ours. We share them.”

Danny stared at me. “So you…” He shook his head. “I don’t understand. How would that work? Surely that would mean that, like, the time we have left is predetermined?”

I gave a small shrug. “I suppose. If you want to think of it that way. But it’s not so much that we will each get a set number of years left if we do it. It’s more that we…” I struggled to word it. “Our life forces become intertwined. They rely on one another.”

“Oh.” Danny let go of a hand to reach up and rub his face nervously. “So, if I die, you die?”

I held back the flinch. “No. That’s not how it works.”

“Then how does it work?” Danny tangled his fingers back through mine, watching me.

“The time I have left to live is far greater than what you have, Danny.” I swallowed, not even wanting to think of it. “This would mean that I would give half of that time to you. And you would give half of yours to me.”

Danny made a weak sound at that. “So you’d get, like, fifty or sixty years at the most from me, and in return you’d have to give me… what, thousands, you said?”

I nodded. “Probably around four.”

He gaped at me for long moments, eyes wide. “F-four thousand years?”

I nodded again, raising his hands to kiss the backs of them. “Yes. Half of what I have left. Roughly.”

Danny didn’t seem to be capable of doing much more than staring at me and weakly squeezing my hands back. I saw his throat bob as he swallowed. “But *could* I still… die before that? Like if something happened? What if we did this and then I died anyway and you’d halved what’s left of your life for no reason?”

I barely resisted the impulse to clutch Danny’s hands too tight, as if that could prevent something from happening to him. “You would be much, much harder to… kill. Like I am. But not unkillable. I’m not unkillable. Nothing is.”

Danny quirked a brow at that. “I’m pretty sure you are, and I sleep better thinking that way, so let’s leave it at that.” He eyed me, more thoughtful and less shellshocked now. “Would I get your smoke thing?” His voice was a little eager.

I huffed, the corner of my mouth twitching. “I’m afraid not, sweet. You’d still essentially be human, just… more indestructible.”

Danny’s cheeks flushed pink. “Sorry, stupid question.”

I leaned forward to kiss his cheek, nuzzling him there. “Not stupid. Never stupid. It’s not like there have been many humans who have had to ask these questions before. And we don’t know for certain that it will work with a human. With someone not from my world.”

Danny jerked back. “Wait, what? Not many? You mean there have been other humans who’ve done this?”

I shrugged one shoulder. “There’s a chance. You have the stories here, don’t you? Of Hades and Persephone. Tam Lin. Oisín and Niamh. Humans being taken by otherworldly creatures, spirited away, sometimes falling in love with them.”

That made Danny grin. He reached into the depths of my hood and cupped my face in his hands with unerring accuracy. He leaned forward to press a kiss to my mouth. “Wyn, you romantic son of a bitch.”

I rolled my eyes. “Focus, my sweet.”

“Right.” Danny sobered, his hands sliding from my face to clutch mine again. “So I would be near indestructible and live a really long time.” He squeezed my fingers. “With you.”

I swallowed, the ache of longing in my chest almost overwhelming me for a moment. “It isn’t conditional upon you staying with me, Danny. I would still… Don’t think that if you accept, you have to stay with me. I would still give my time to you. I still want you to have it.”

“Why would I not want to stay with you?” Danny asked me, his tone conveying how ridiculous he found the question. It soothed something deep within me.

“But if you *don’t* want… If you just want to live your normal human life, I swear I will protect you for all of it. And I will treasure every moment I get to spend with you.”

He watched me for a long moment. “But then, when I die, you’d be alone again.”

I flinched. I hated when Danny talked so casually about his human mortality, or his inevitable death. “It would be worth it. For the time I had with you.”

Danny’s face softened. “Wyn…” He leaned forward to kiss me, his mouth warm and sweet. I clung to his lips, for as long as he would let me. Then he moved back. “And you’re really… willing to do that? You’re getting the raw end of the deal here. You’d be…”—he swallowed —“halving what’s left of your life. For me.”

That made me wheeze out a grating laugh. “Trust me, Danny, I am *not* getting the raw end of the deal.” I wrapped my arms tight around his middle, pulling him closer. “I get *you*.”

“Oh my god, Wyn, you’re being *so* romantic today.” Danny threw his arms around my neck and grinned widely at me. “Are you sick? Do you feel —”

“Shut up,” I growled, dipping my head to kiss him, which I’d found was the most effective way to put an end to his incessant teasing.

It didn’t work this time.

“Mmm.” I could feel Danny still smiling against my mouth, and he pulled back from the kiss to say, “So I guess I’ll have to stop calling you old man and Father Time if I end up four thousand years old—”

I kissed him again, and this time it worked.

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CHAPTER THREE

“Have you given it any thought?” I asked Danny later that night, as we once again lay together in that big bed. He was staring up at the ceiling beside me, cheeks flushed, still panting softly as he recovered from our vigorous fucking. I smirked a little as I shuffled closer, pressing my lips against his sweat-damp shoulder.

I was addicted to the pleasure-dazed look I could put on his face.

Danny snuffled a laugh and turned his head to kiss the top of mine. “You know, you’re pretty impatient for a dude who’s been alive for so long.”

I stiffened. “I’m not trying to rush you—”

“Relax, I’m kidding.” Danny rubbed the tip of his nose over one of the thin ridges on my forehead, making me shiver.

Earlier, he’d asked for some time to think it over. I wasn’t trying to pressure him into giving me an answer, but the low hum of discomfort at the thought of how easily I could lose him had turned into a sense of urgency, now that we’d discussed a chance of making him more resistant to injury.

I felt Danny’s lips curve up against my forehead. “Are you thinking I’ll be more inclined to say yes just after you’ve made me come?”

Despite the low hum of tension inside me while I waited for his answer, my mouth widened into an evil grin, all my sharp teeth on display. “Yes.”

He laughed and turned to face me, wrapping an arm around my waist.

“I wanted to say yes straight away,” he told me, face serious now as he looked at me. “I want to be with you for as long as I can, Wyn. I just wasn’t…” He hesitated. “Humans weren’t made to be alive for so long. What if I… become different? Eventually?”

I cupped his cheek, smoothing my thumb over the delicate skin beneath his eye. “It’s possible. I’m sorry I can’t give you more concrete answers. I suppose you have to decide whether you want to take that risk. But I’ll always love you, Danny. And I have experience with living for a long time.” I gave him a small smile. “I can help to make sure you don’t… lose yourself.”

He smiled at me, and my insides twisted with that deep ache of want that never went away when it came to him.

Then he nodded, and that ache sharpened into a flare of tentative hope.

"Let's do it," he said. "There's no guarantee, right? But we can at least try. And I want to have as much time as I possibly can with you."

I nodded, swallowing, forcing my fingers not to twitch against his cheek in reaction. We would try.

If it worked, I would have Danny forever.

"Does this mean I'm going to see your world?" His eyes sparked with excitement as he moved closer to me, dropping a kiss on my chin. "We're going through the tear?"

I nodded again, shifting my hand back to card my fingers through his hair. "Yes." My voice was hoarse. "We're going through."

The smile fell from Danny's face, and he chewed on his lower lip nervously. "Is it really dangerous?"

"It might be dangerous." I didn't want to lie to him. "We have to get past the military at the tear. And my world… there are some creatures there that haven't come through. That you won't have seen before. But I will protect you, Danny."

My insides still churned with unease. Worry. I worried constantly about Danny's safety. About my ability to keep him safe and happy.

Maybe if this worked, I wouldn't have to worry quite so much.

"I know you will." Danny smiled, the fear melting from his face. He leaned forward to kiss me. "Honestly, I'm more excited than scared. I'll get to see *your* world. That's wild. How different is it?"

I wanted to smile at his growing enthusiasm, but refrained. "Different enough. It will probably look strange to you. The site of the tear in our world is remote. But there are built-up areas. Cities." I stroked his cheek with my thumb. "Maybe after we have visited the Caen an Sin, I can take you to one. When it's safe."

"Caen an Sin," Danny repeated, struggling with the pronunciation. "Is that the… where we do the thing?"

My lips twitched. "Where we tether our lives, yes."

"What's it like?"

"I've never been. But I know where it is. I can get us there."

"You mean you've never seduced anyone else with your sexy voice and insane skills in the sack?" He dropped another kiss on my chin.

I rolled my eyes. "I think you are the only being alive who would ever consider my voice anything other than hideous."

“Hey.” Danny’s hand smacked my side weakly, and I wanted to smile at his indignant defence of me—even against myself. “Nothing about you is hideous. You’re the best.”

I gave a noncommittal grunt in answer, then rolled Danny onto his back so I could get on top of him. “I will agree about the skills, though.” I dipped my head to his neck, nuzzling him. “If we’re measuring by how loud I can make you get.”

I felt the blood rush up Danny’s throat beneath my lips, and I knew he had turned splotchy from my words. It just made me want to goad him more.

I trailed my lips up his neck and mouthed his earlobe. “Shall I see how loud I can make you get now, my sweet human?”

Danny shivered, hands sliding up my sides, over my rough, scarred skin. “You’re an insatiable beast.”

I huffed in amusement, kissing the soft skin just beneath his ear. “A beast. That’s fitting.”

“Although…” He raised a hand, and I felt him lightly trace the mark he’d left on my shoulder as he was coming. “*I’m* the one who nearly took a chunk out of you earlier. Sorry.”

I felt the wicked grin stretch my mouth. Danny liked to bite.

“It’s not like a few more scars will make a difference,” I said, lightly scraping my teeth against his throat, just to feel him shiver.

He flicked my ear. “It’s not going to scar, you drama queen. I didn’t bite you *that* hard.”

I lifted my head to look down at him. “Don’t hold back on my account.”

Danny laughed until I interrupted him with a kiss. My hips shifted as I dipped my tongue into his mouth. Beneath me Danny shuddered, arching just a little to slide his stiffening cock against me. His fingers trailed lightly over the heavily scarred side of my head—the half that had been blown off by the military. A wide strip of hair had never grown back on that side after I’d healed, and the skin felt strangely sensitive to Danny’s touch despite the thick scars.

Despite my earlier teasing, I reluctantly broke the kiss. We still had to discuss what we were going to do before we got distracted.

“Are you sure, Danny?” I asked him, holding myself up on my arms so I could look down at him properly. “That you want to do this?” I swallowed, the next question making me feel disgustingly vulnerable. “With me?”

“Yes. I’m sure.” Danny cupped my face and leaned up to kiss me soundly. “I promise. I’m sure.”

I let out a raspy breath I hadn’t been aware I was holding. “Alright,” I croaked. “We’ll go, then. We’ll try.”

Danny grinned up at me, blue eyes flashing with excitement. Danny thought he wasn’t brave, but he was. When he decided on something, he was committed, no matter how terrifying that thing might have been.

“When?” he asked eagerly, proving he was already all in. “The tear is near here, right?”

I nodded. “The north-western part of Texas. It won’t take us too long to get there.” And then I had to figure out how to safely get Danny past the military blockades around it.

I wasn’t sure he would appreciate me just killing them all so the path was clear.

Maybe I’d gently suggest it when we were closer.

“So we take off from here tomorrow and get any supplies we might need on the way?” Danny slid his hands up my arms to grab my shoulders.

When I nodded, he grinned before licking his lower lip, drawing my gaze down to his mouth. He reached up and grasped the base of my horns, which made arousal pulse through my body. The left was still somewhat shorter than the right, but it had almost fully grown back.

Danny used his grip to gently tug my head down to his, which made me want to hiss with pleasure.

“So we should probably fuck in this big, soft bed again before we hit the road, right?” he said before kissing me. I couldn’t help but grin against his mouth.

We made sure to fuck in the big soft bed at least twice more before we left.

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CHAPTER FOUR

As we travelled closer to the tear, the scatter of creatures from my world that we passed grew thicker. Most avoided my kind out of instinct, but there were some that feared very little. I thought back on the kerenis that Danny and I had seen in Wyoming. They were little more than mindless, dark masses of insatiable hunger, uncaring what they feasted on. Luckily, they were rare, and I didn't spot any as we made our way toward the tear.

I wondered what had become of the rycke. I had reluctantly freed him from his cell at the Nebraska military base, but I hadn't lingered to see what he would do. Each rycke had different triggers, but most were fiercely possessive of what they considered 'theirs', whether that was a place, an object or a living being. If that one had something or someone the military had hurt or taken away when they'd captured him, he would have never forgotten—or forgiven—no matter how long they'd held him in that cell. I hadn't particularly wanted to be there to see if this one would snap. Especially as I had been mostly concerned with getting an unconscious Danny far, far away from that place.

I couldn't stop my mind drifting to the possibility of this working. A thin thread of excitement tightened my insides at the thought of Danny being stronger and less vulnerable. Being safer. Being with me forever.

Just as there were stories and myths here, there were legends in my world of creatures falling in love with humans and taking them to the Caen an Sin to give them immortality. It wasn't truly immortality, but legends always became twisted as they passed between storytellers.

So while I had told Danny that it wasn't a certainty that this would work, something deep inside me told me that it would. There was a reason I had reacted to Danny so strongly when I first saw him, despite him looking like every other human soldier that day. A reason why the very essence of me had strained for him, desperately reaching out the moment I had seen his face for the first time. I had imprinted on him without conscious thought in that moment, my blood pounding for him.

He was mine. He was always supposed to be mine. I had just needed to wait for a long time to find him. But the wait had been worth it.

“How long will it take us to reach the… time place once we’re through the tear?” Danny asked me as we walked down a gravel road between flat, green fields.

Weeds that reached our waists brushed us as we walked, and the crunch beneath our boots was the only sound other than the chittering of insects in the tall grass. The sky above was steely grey and heavy. The air was getting colder. I tried to work out what season it would be in my world when we reached it. The mildest, I thought, which was fortunate. The water around the Caen an Sin grew fierce when the storms came. And when the storms came, that meant the two mabs were fighting.

I had never seen the mabs, but I knew of them. All did. They lived at the Caen an Sin, on its remote island, and bore witness to the sharing of time between visitors. Their lifespans made mine look like a mere blip in the fabric of time.

My lips twitched at Danny’s underwhelming description of the ancient, powerful fortress. *Time place.*

“The Caen an Sin,” I said, then thought about it. “Four or five days, I think. Our world is smaller than yours, which is why so many creatures were eager to come and explore this one.”

“And when we’re done there, we’ll go visit one of the cities, you said?” Danny gripped my hand tighter, looking over at me with excitement shining in his blue eyes. “Can I see where you live?”

I hesitated. I was glad my hood was up, because a disgusting wave of self-consciousness washed over me. “That probably isn’t possible.”

“Why not?” Danny snickered, adjusting his grip on the metal bat resting on his shoulder. I had stolen a rifle from the military for him again a while ago, but he insisted on keeping the bat as well. “Are you a slob?”

I rolled my eyes. “No, but…” I swallowed, feeling strangely embarrassed. “My nest is in… My kind tend to nest deep within the rocks, where no one can reach us while we’re resting between hunts.”

“Deep within… Like in a cave?”

“Not like an animal,” I said quickly, my tone too defensive when I knew Danny wasn’t being judgmental. “Not a cave. A chamber that can only be reached by a tiny opening. So that nothing can get to us.”

“Oh.” Understanding dawned in Danny’s voice. “Your smoke thing.”

I nodded.

“So no front door for my bulky human body.” Danny’s tone was teasing as he swayed closer to me, brushing against my side as we walked. “That’s a shame. But it’s okay. It’s not like we were going to live there.” He suddenly went tense, and I sensed him looking at me. “Unless you want us to live there? In your world?”

I shrugged. “I don’t mind where we are, Danny.” As long as I was with him, I couldn’t care less.

“Assuming we figure out a straightforward way to get past the military at the tear, maybe we could go back and forth, if you miss your world.” Danny squeezed my hand. “But we’d have to come back to find parasites.”

I nodded absently, mind already drifting to the possibility. Would Danny be safer in my world, after we had tethered our lives and he was less vulnerable? There would be no military there to look for him—not that I thought they were actively looking anymore. No raiders with their ridiculous weapons and improvised firebombs to try and hurt him just for being with me.

There were other dangers, though. Ones he might not be as well equipped to handle. Besides, he might loathe my world. It would be alien to him. Strange.

I would leave it to Danny to decide what we would do. Before that, I had to focus on getting him safely to the Caen an Sin.

Which meant first, I had to get him safely through the tear.

I cleared my throat, tightening my grip on Danny’s hand as we walked. “I had an idea about how we would get through the tear.”

“Oh yeah? What’s that?”

I hesitated. I was fairly sure I knew what Danny’s response would be to ‘Kill everyone,’ but it really was the most efficient option.

“Well—” I stopped when that familiar buzz pressed against the base of my skull. I cocked my head, pinpointing where it was reaching me from.

Danny was familiar with it all now.

“Duty calls,” he said cheerfully as he let go of my hand to shove his headgear on. I insisted on him wearing full protection when we had to approach raider camps for me to eliminate parasites, even though I made him stay a fair distance away after too many close calls.

“Only one,” I told him, gaze zeroing in on the lone farmhouse we could see. It sat at the end of the long dirt drive that split off from the gravel road we were walking on. A crumbling barn was tucked behind it, roof half

missing, but I could sense that the parasite—and the few humans—were in the house. There was no fear from them yet, so they didn't know we were here.

I'd make this quick.

I took Danny's hand and led him to a huge nearby tree, depositing him at its base, where its thick trunk hid him from view. "Stay here, sweet. I won't be long."

"Be safe," Danny told me, like he always did—needlessly. But it still made pleasure curl through my insides every time.

I placed my palm on his chest to feel his warmth and the strong beat of his heart for just a moment before dissipating. I resolidified inside the house seconds later, in the room with the infected human. They were asleep on the old, sagging bed, and they were alone, which would make this far simpler. No screaming or hysterics from the other occupants. I could hear others downstairs—the quiet murmur of relaxed voices, completely unaware of the monster in their midst.

The parasite in this human was new. It was still laying its eggs in her belly, which meant she wasn't going to die today. She would feel unwell for a few days, but she would live.

I crossed to the bed, keeping my footsteps silent, and leaned down over the prone human female. Her lips were already parted in sleep, but I clasped her face to open them wider. My insides churned as I forced the parasite's essence to leave her body, drawing it to me. I could feel the infection rising up through her guts, into her throat. I saw the ripple of it, much smaller than when the parasite was fully grown and had drained its host dry.

The human's body tensed on the bed as the thick blackness emerged from her mouth and poured down my throat. I absorbed the infection, the parasite's life, leaving nothing in her belly but the husks of both the creature and its eggs, which would dissolve in a day or two.

I let go of her jaw and straightened. She slept undisturbed, but her face was less sickly now, her brows no longer furrowed in discomfort. I had no interest in lingering, so I turned back to smoke and returned to Danny, who was fidgeting impatiently beneath the tree.

"You okay?" he asked the moment I solidified, stepping forward to rest his free hand on my chest, the other clutching his bat. "Was it bad?"

I shook my head, taking his hand and leading him back to the road. The humans hadn't spotted us yet, but they would if one of them looked out of a

window. “She had only just been infected. They’ll never even know.”

Danny squeezed my hand. I could hear the grin in his voice. “That’s great.” He swayed closer to me as we walked. “Admit it. You secretly love humans.”

I wheezed. “You’re funny.”

He laughed. “I’m not joking! You must like them a *little* to save them—us—from being wiped out by parasites.” He nudged me. “You like *me* at least, right?” he teased.

I rolled my eyes. “I *like* preventing the parasites from wiping out humanity and then moving on to other species that are more troublesome.” After a pause, I grunted. “It’s just fortunate that doing so led me to you.”

Danny snuffled with laughter inside his helmet. “Sure.”

At length, I added, “I suppose we feel somewhat responsible for keeping them in check. We are the same species.”

“We? As in, the last seven of you?”

I nodded, thinking of the others. The hunt had technically ended, which was why Danny and I came across far fewer parasites these days. The seven of us had destroyed enough of them to warrant returning to our nests and sleeping until the next hunt. But I hadn’t. I’d stayed here, with Danny.

I wondered if they'd noticed that I hadn’t returned.

“Have the parasites always infected just humans?” Danny asked, voice curious. He pulled off his headgear and shoved it under his arm.

I shook my head. “Not always. Before, hardly any got through. Since the tears got bigger, they have flooded this world. There are other species they infect, but they quickly discovered that a human body is the ideal host. Eggs almost always survive in a human, whereas the chances are much lower with other species.”

“But if you and the other Soul Eaters weren’t destroying them, wouldn’t they eventually wipe out humanity entirely?” Danny asked. “Isn’t that, like, counterproductive for a parasite?”

I shrugged. “It’s possible, but parasites—all parasites—adapt. If it looked like they were running out of hosts, I’m sure they’d adapt somehow. Or they’d move on to another species.”

“God, they’re the worst,” Danny muttered, making my lips twitch into a small smile.

“They are,” I agreed, then looked over at him as I wrapped my arm around his shoulders, pulling him closer. “Just think, my sweet. If this

works, you can spend the next several millennia helping me destroy them. Doesn't that sound fun?"

He grinned up at me. "I know you're bein' sarcastic but it actually does."

I huffed. "It does not."

"It does! I like travelling with you. Exploring. Besides, now that you're not going back to sleep until the parasites start spreading too much again, maybe we'll be able to wipe them out entirely. Then we can do whatever we want."

The thought gave me pause. None of us had ever truly tried to wipe out the parasites entirely, mainly because the hunt gave us something to do. When you lived this long, you had a lot of time to fill.

But Danny was right. If we tried to destroy them once and for all, we would be free to do whatever we wanted. I liked that idea. If we did that, we could go anywhere. We could spend months hidden away together, just the two of us. Years, even.

Yes. I liked that idea very much.

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CHAPTER FIVE

The night before we reached the tear, I left Danny sleeping in the apartment we'd stopped in to rest. For a long time, I hadn't ever left him while he slept, when he'd still been having awful nightmares every night, waking up gasping for breath and trembling. I had felt pathetically useless when all I could do was hold him close.

Eventually the nightmares became less frequent, especially after I finally got my revenge on Mallory. Now he had them only occasionally, and I could normally tell when it would be a night for one, because his sleep would be restless and his skin would grow hot and damp. Tonight, he was sleeping peacefully, but I still wanted to make this quick.

After dissipating, it took me only minutes to reach the perimeter of the military blockades that surrounded the doorway to my world.

I watched the soldiers in their towers and trucks, just outside of the tall, thick wall the military had erected around the tear. The wall did little except offer the people who were forced to guard this place a modicum of comfort. It had to be replaced often, in sections, because creatures barrelled into it, or sliced through it, or simply crawled over the top.

Beyond the wall, the stretch of empty land leading to the tear was riddled with mines hidden in the ground. There were some fresh-looking body parts from unknown creatures littering the churned ground, suggesting there had been some attempts to get through the tear earlier in the night, but all was quiet. Regardless, I wasn't here to see how the military's efforts were going in fighting back monsters. I already knew they weren't very good at it.

No, I was here for a very specific reason, and when it was done, I would return to Danny and slip into bed beside him until he woke.

With that motivation driving me, I swooped down to the nearest soldier and grabbed him by the back of the neck, still in my smoke form.

His terrified shout rang through the night, alerting others immediately. But I'd already hoisted him over the wall. His boots barely touched the ground as I soared toward the tear. He was still screaming in fear, twisting in my grasp, but there was nothing for him to grab onto except thick black smoke.

Gunshots cracked through the air, and I growled in displeasure at the thought that they might inadvertently shoot the soldier before I was done with him. Luckily, I reached the tear a moment later. The soldier's screams sharpened, and he squirmed frantically in my grip.

"Fuck—no—" he cried, before rippling black engulfed us.

The pull from my world sucked us through, effortless when I was in this form, but I paid close attention to how the soldier reacted. Aside from his constant noises of fear and panic, he didn't seem to be in any pain. That was good.

The valley was quiet when we made it through, but I didn't stop until we reached the small stream that cut through the rocks. It was night here too, so the crystal was bright as it shimmered purple under the water. Danny would probably like it.

But again, that wasn't why I was here.

I shoved the panicking soldier down beside the stream and solidified, rolling my eyes when he let out a terrified shout and scrambled back.

He fumbled for his rifle with shaking hands as I advanced. I grabbed it and bent it in half before he could get to it, then yanked off his headgear and discarded that too. Wide eyes stared up at me from a blood-drained face, the human's mouth gaping in fear.

Grabbing his scruff, I hauled him to the edge of the stream and shoved his face toward it. "Drink."

"Wh-what—" The soldier's neck was tense beneath my grip as he desperately tried to keep his face away from the glowing water.

"Drink it," I repeated, jerking his head closer. "Drink the fucking water."

"I d-don't—W-w-why—"

I leaned in close, and felt him shudder with horror when my cold breath ghosted over the side of his neck. "Do I have to force it down your throat?"

"F-f-fuck." With a wildly shaking hand, the soldier cupped some water in his gloved palm and brought it to his mouth. It sprayed as his frantic breaths blew most of it back out, but at least some actually got in his mouth. He swallowed loudly.

"Was that so fucking hard?" I muttered, hauling him away from the stream to drag him over to the bushes that grew in abundance at its edge.

I grabbed a handful of the deep green berries that grew in fat clusters. Plucking two from the bunch, I held them toward the soldier. "Eat them."

“Why are you m-m-making m-me do this,” he stuttered but took the berries. “Is this going to k-kill me?”

“The idea is to find out,” I snapped impatiently, gesturing for him to hurry up. “So eat the fucking berries. The sooner you do it, the sooner I’ll take you back.”

The soldier stared at me with a slack mouth. “You’re—you’re not going to suck out my soul?”

My lip curled with revulsion. “I can’t think of a single thing I want to do less, human.”

He continued staring up at me, gormless like the majority of his kind. “So… you’re *not* going to kill me?”

“I might if you don’t hurry the fuck up,” I snarled, glaring at him from the depths of my hood. “I have better places to be.”

“Shit,” the soldier whispered, head bowing to stare at the berries in his hand. My fingers twitched at my sides with irritation when he didn’t move. Just as I was preparing to shove them in his mouth myself, he exhaled a sharp breath and crammed them in.

He chewed quickly, cringing at first until the taste burst on his tongue. “They—they’re actually good,” he said in shock, chancing a timid glance up at me.

I rolled my eyes. I wasn’t making him eat them to see if he liked the fucking taste, but at least if they appealed to a human palate, that meant Danny was more likely to enjoy them.

Assuming this human didn’t keel over dead in a few minutes.

“Don’t move.” I dissipated to grab one of the drupes that hung, fat and heavy, from a nearby lyteg tree. When I returned to the kneeling soldier, I held it out, its skin bumpy beneath my fingers. “Eat it.”

The soldier exhaled a trembling breath and reached out to take it. He grimaced at its skin’s texture. It didn’t look particularly attractive, warty and purplish-brown, but these trees grew in abundance across this area, and the fruit was plentiful.

I watched intently as the soldier took a tentative bite. The flesh inside was pale purple and dripped with juice. Edin’s kind had lived in forests laden with these fruit before all but him had been wiped out.

He chewed, nervously reaching up to wipe the juice from his chin with a gloved hand. “Um… tastes good,” he offered after swallowing.

I grunted. “No burning? Tongue going numb? Throat closing up?”

The soldier went even paler. “Should there be?”

I gave him a wide, sharp grin from within my hood, even though he couldn’t see it. “We’ll find out together, won’t we?”

The soldier swallowed and looked back down at the fruit in his hand. After a moment, he hesitantly set the rest of it down beside him.

“Do you know how to build a fire?” I barked at him, and he jumped.

“I—um, ye-yes.”

I dissipated to gather what he needed. I could see the soldier looking around frantically, either for his ruined rifle or perhaps the tear. There was no way he’d be able to reach the tear before I got to him, and I had lobbed the gun into the water. They could just give him a new one when I took him back.

I dumped branches, twigs and dried leaves in front of him. “Make a fire,” I said, before vanishing once again to quickly hunt down a wanuk. There were plenty of them in the valley, and it didn’t take me long.

The soldier had haphazardly piled the branches and twigs when I returned with it. After giving the small creature a quick death, I skinned and gutted it while the soldier stripped off one of his gloves and pulled out a lighter. He held it to the dried leaves in the centre of his poorly constructed pile with a trembling hand.

I quirked a brow but said nothing as I crouched on the other side of the fire. I wasn’t sure if holding a lighter counted as building a fire, but fine.

The soldier blew gently on the tiny flame until it spread. Fire burned white here, not the yellows and oranges of the human world. But the air had to be similar enough, because the soldier was breathing fine, and his aura—while bright and jumpy with fear—remained healthy. One less thing to worry about.

Once the small fire was crackling and burning well, he sat back and eyed me nervously as I used my black-bladed dagger to slice thin strips from the skinned wanuk’s flank. Skewering them on my knife, I held it over the fire. “Hope you’re still hungry.”

The soldier swallowed but said nothing. After a few minutes, the fatty meat was spitting, charred in some places but mostly brown, and no more blood dripped into the fire beneath.

I held the knife out to the soldier in silence.

He stayed perfectly still for a moment, before reaching out to hesitantly take a slice of meat from the end of the blade. He blew on it rapidly,

dancing it between his fingers. After a deep breath, he stuffed it into his mouth.

He eyed me nervously as he chewed. “Why are you doing this?”

“Why should I tell you?” I countered, moving the rest of the wanuk away from the fire so another creature could steal it away for its meal. When the soldier swallowed the meat noisily, I stared at him. “Well?”

He licked his lips nervously. “Yeah—I mean, it tasted fine. I feel fine,” he added quickly when I let out a displeased grunt at his answer.

The soldier flinched back when I stood up. “Wh-what now?” he asked, the trepidation clear in his voice.

He yelped when I yanked him to his feet by his scruff. “I take you back.” I kicked out the fire.

“Wait,” he cried before I could dissipate. “Do you have to—Can't I walk back through?”

I grunted. “Do you want to risk walking through and being shot before they realise you’re not a monster? Or do you want me to get you back to your post quickly? And don’t forget all those mines,” I added flatly. “Do you know where they all are?”

Indecision contorted his plain human features for a few moments. He breathed out shakily. “Okay, fast is good.”

Without bothering to say anything else, I turned to smoke and flew back toward the tear, ignoring the hoarse yelp from the soldier.

The soldiers were panicking when we emerged through the tear. Agitated shouts cut through the air, floodlights flashing as they frantically searched the area in front. The soldier in my grip was breathing hard, but he stayed silent as I soared back over the wall and deposited him exactly where I’d found him.

His legs were shaking when I set him on his feet, but he seemed fine. Healthy still. He wasn’t sweating or trembling from anything but fear. He was pale, but he didn’t look ill.

Relief coursed through me, hot and potent.

Without saying another word, I left, detouring to steal some MREs and hydration tabs for Danny from the canteen in the military building beside the perimeter. Then I sped back to the apartment where Danny still slept peacefully. He made a soft noise in his sleep when I slipped back into bed beside him, but didn’t wake up. I pressed my lips to the back of his head

and wrapped my arm around his waist, pulling him tight into the cradle of my body.

He fit there perfectly.

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CHAPTER SIX

“Didn’t you say you had an idea about how we can get past the military?” Danny asked me the next morning, as we stood and eyed the tear from a distance.

I grunted. “You won’t like it.”

He sighed and turned to face me. “Is it to just go and kill everyone?”

I shifted from one boot to the other, arms crossed. I refused to look over at him, pretending to be very interested in what was going on around the tear—which was nothing. When he carried on waiting in silence for my answer, I gave a tiny, one-shouldered shrug.

Danny sighed again, exasperated this time. “We can’t just kill everyone who’s in our way, Wyn. What if that had been me down there, huh? It was just luck I never had to come keep watch here.”

I bared my teeth within my hood in a displeased snarl. He had to go and say the one fucking thing to successfully deter me from killing every soldier down there. It wasn’t like I made a habit of killing whoever was in my way. *I* thought I killed hardly any humans at all, in the grand scheme of things. But the military was different.

The military had hurt Danny.

I reluctantly admitted, though, that he was right. It could have easily been him down there. Some poor, green soldier thrust into a dangerous post in the Wastes, not knowing what he was going to face. Just like Danny had been.

I thought of the soldier who had helped me to see if my world would be safe for Danny. He had been useful. I supposed.

“Fine,” I gritted out, my lip curling with disgust at myself for how soft I was getting. “We’ll think of a less permanent solution.”

“Could we… distract them all?” Danny asked hesitantly, then jumped when the faint rattle of rapid gunfire reached us. Something had obviously just come through.

There was a roar and a rhythmic thump as whatever beast had just crossed over made a run for the wall, seeming to avoid any mines because no explosions followed. Seconds later, it smashed its way through, and the frantic shouting of soldiers rose up like a chorus. Bullets peppered the

creature's back, but it ignored them all. We watched in silence as, undeterred, it loped away in huge strides until it was gone.

Danny let out a breath, cheeks puffing. "That wall seems a bit useless, doesn't it?"

I huffed in amusement. "Yes."

He let out another big sigh, planting his free hand on his hip as he peered at the tear in the distance. His other hand held onto his baseball bat, resting over his shoulder. "Okay. So how are we going to do this?"

I pursed my lips. Danny's soft-hearted desire to keep the humans alive made this a touch more difficult. I had to figure out how to get us past all the human soldiers and their weapons, and then all the land mines on the ground in front of the tear.

I could turn to smoke and carry Danny, like I had with the soldier last night. But it was too risky. One stray bullet could be all it took. I also suspected Danny might object to dangling in the air while I flew us through. Humans got self-conscious and prideful about odd things, and I knew he already worried that he was weak.

I huffed irritably, cocking my head as I assessed the military presence around the tear. "My sweet, it really would be a lot simpler if—"

"Wyn." Danny cut me off, turning and reaching into my hood to cup my chin with his free hand. "You are not goin' down there and killing everyone." He leaned up and kissed me, most likely to appease me. It worked. "Besides, we need a solution that will work just as well when we come back through."

I grasped his sides, fingers twitching. "Well, my idea *would*—" I stopped at the look on Danny's face. "Fine."

He turned to look back down toward the tear, hand sliding from my face to rest on his hip once more. "Can we draw them away somehow?"

I shook my head. "They wouldn't all leave. They would never leave the tear entirely unguarded. I could fling them all far away?" I added, eagerness bleeding into my voice.

"Humans don't tend to survive being flung great distances through the air, Wyn."

I refrained from rolling my eyes, because I swore Danny somehow knew I was doing it even when my hood was up.

"I could *gently deposit* them all far away," I amended. "But it would take a while. There are a lot of them down there, and I would only be able to

carry… maybe four or five at once. Any more than that is cumbersome. Humans flail a lot."

Danny snorted a little laugh. "Okay. Well, it's still the best, least murderous idea we've had."

I hesitated, not sure whether I wanted to voice what I was thinking. I did have the ability to render humans unconscious, if I seeped into their brain while in my smoke form. I had done it to Danny that day in my cell at the Nebraska base, when I started setting all the other creatures free. It had been the safest way to get him out of there without struggle.

The problem was that it was… invasive. Not just for the human. But for me. Other than Danny, I absolutely did not want to travel up a disgusting human nose or seep around their eyeballs to get into their skull. It was… unpleasant.

But it was also effective. And subtle. And quick.

I sighed. "I could send them all to sleep," I said to Danny, the reluctance clear in my voice.

He turned back to face me. "You can do that?"

I nodded. "I did it to you, remember? At the military base?"

"Oh yeah." Danny turned back to look at the tear. "Would it be difficult?"

I scoffed. "Of course not."

Danny's lips twitched, but he said nothing at first, just nodded. "Well, if you think that's the best idea…"

I quirked a brow but didn't voice what we both knew I was thinking—what *I* thought my best idea was.

"I suppose it's the cleanest solution," I said. "Now we just need to figure out how to get you past all the mines. Are you opposed to me carrying you?"

Danny made a face, cheeks flushing. "I mean, I'd rather not. It's kind of demeaning. But if it makes it easier—"

I reached over and stroked his cheek, cutting him off. "If you don't want to, we won't do it. I'll make it so you can walk through the tear with your dignity intact."

Danny flushed deeper and gave my middle a half-hearted shove. "Would *you* want to hang uselessly in the air while your powerful monster boyfriend fucked shit up in his cool black smoke form?"

I blinked. “Did you want me to actually answer that?” I asked sincerely, and Danny laughed.

“Maybe I can help?” He eyed the military in the distance. “I know I don’t use it often, but I *do* have combat training. I could distract them while you—”

“Danny.” I turned him toward me and cupped his face. “My sweet human. You know I love you, yes?”

Danny looked uncertain—and a little suspicious. “Um, yes. I love y—”

“But you were a terrible soldier,” I cut in, trying to keep my voice gentle.

He stared up at me, lips parted in disbelief. “What—No, I wasn’t!” He grimaced, even as his face flushed. “Okay, maybe I was.”

“It’s just not your calling,” I told him, stroking his cheek. “There’s no shame in it.”

“Oh, really? Because it *feels* like there’s shame in it right now.” Danny glared up at me, but I knew he wasn’t truly angry. Mainly because he was gripping my coat tight to keep me close.

My mouth twitched. “You have many strengths. They’re just not the strengths that a human soldier seems to need.”

“Yeah, okay. Just go and get on with it while I wait here like a chump,” Danny grumbled, trying to shove me away.

I wheezed a laugh, not letting him. “So you’ll stay here with your gun ready? Out of sight?”

Danny rolled his eyes. When he nodded, I kissed him on the cheek. “Thank you.”

“You still can’t kill them though,” he added, voice adorably stubborn.

I stroked his cheekbones with my thumbs. “I promise I won’t kill any of them. Unless it becomes absolutely necessary.”

The caveat made him narrow his eyes with suspicion. “What do you consider *absolutely necessary*?”

“Just…” I worked my jaw from side to side as I tried to come up with an answer he wouldn’t disapprove of. I couldn’t think of anything. “You know how it is in the heat of a volatile moment. You just follow your gut instincts.”

Danny snorted. “My gut instinct was to freeze up and watch you slaughter everyone around me, so I think we have very different opinions on when murder is warranted.”

“If it looks like you are in any danger whatsoever, I’m murdering them.” My tone brooked no argument, and I held back my irritated sigh when Danny went pale.

“Which means,” I added quickly, before he could speak, “that it is in everyone’s best interests for you to remain here, out of sight, with your gun ready. Yes?”

“You’re such a shit,” he muttered. “Fine. Yes. I already said I would.”

My mouth twitched at his sulky tone. Rather than comment on it, I dipped my head to kiss him, sucking on his lower lip and briefly scraping my teeth over it to make him a little more malleable. He melted against me, fingers clinging to the scar-roughened skin of my back through my coat and shirt.

After stepping back, I unhooked his headgear from his bag and pushed it into his hands. Danny put it on without question before reaching around to grab his rifle.

He exhaled a sharp breath. “Please be careful, okay?” I could hear the worry in his voice. “I love you.”

“I will.” I rested my hand on the centre of his chest to feel his heartbeat. “I love you, too. I won’t be long.”

I dissipated and flowed over the distance to the base. I went to the watchtowers first, because those soldiers would be the least conspicuous when they were slumped unconscious on the floor. I grimaced internally as I seeped inside their headgear and into their brains, making my way to each soldier as quickly as possible.

I distracted myself with the sweet memories of chopping off each of Mallory’s fingers that night at the old prison further north. Carving the word MONSTER into his chest had been particularly satisfying. I had wanted to keep going—to draw it out for far, far longer—but I wasn’t sure Danny would have appreciated it. Truthfully, I had worried about the way he might have looked at me, if he had witnessed the true extent of what I was capable of doing. Of what I had been willing—eager—to do to satisfy the blood-boiling rage I felt toward that vile little human.

So, I had restrained myself. Somehow. Even though Danny had told me everything that had happened to him while I was healing from the head wound they gave me. He’d told me everything they had threatened him with. If I had been alone with Mallory, I would have sliced off every other

appendage on his body until he was nothing but an unidentifiable lump of writhing meat.

Once all the soldiers in the watchtowers were unconscious, I made my way down to the ground. Soldiers stood along the outer perimeter of the wall, armed with rifles, while others sat in trucks paying very little attention. There were only a few surprised sounds from humans as their fellow soldiers dropped limp to the ground beside them, but I worked quickly, so none of them truly had time to react or raise any alarms.

It was silent when the last one dropped, save for the strangely muted roar of the tear. I resolidified at the new, monster-made hole in the wall and stared critically at the stretch of land between me and the shimmering energy of the door to my world.

Now the mines.

I crouched to pick up a chunk of rubble from the ruined portion of the wall. Straightening back up, I lobbed it and cocked my head at the explosion that followed, sending earth raining down through the settling dust cloud.

With a sigh, I dissipated once more and started scouring the earth for mines, resolidifying just long enough to jump on each one's pressure plate to set it off. I refused to admit, even to myself, that it was actually somewhat amusing. Like a game.

Rotting remains of creatures from my world littered the ground, chunks of gore raining down when they were caught in the explosions. A pointless waste of life, but humans had always been strangely cavalier about the lives of others, while remaining terrified of death themselves.

Once I was certain that all the mines were gone, I flowed back over the wall toward the nearest military truck. While I couldn't absorb other living beings with my "smoke thing", as Danny lovingly called it, I could absorb inanimate objects. I could take a car back to Danny so he didn't have to walk all the way to the tear from where I'd left him.

The soldier who'd been sitting in the truck was already slumped on the ground beside it. I nudged him aside and absorbed the car into my smoke form, then started heading back.

I could see Danny leaning back against a tree as I approached, rifle in one hand and metal bat in the other. He jumped violently, dropping both, when I let go of the car and it crashed to the ground in front of him out of thin air.

“Jesus fucking Christ.” He clutched at his chest, panting hard behind his headgear before he tugged off his helmet and goggles. He ripped his mask down and sucked in a shaky breath.

I solidified and patted the hood. “I brought you a car.”

“Yeah, I… can see that.” He still seemed to be recovering from the shock as he bent down to grab his gun and bat. “That’s real sweet of you, baby, but I’m not sure it’s still goin’ to work after you dropped it like that.”

I grunted. “I didn’t drop it from all that high. It’ll be fine.” I walked to the driver’s side door and opened it, gesturing for Danny to get in. “And if it doesn’t work, I’ll go get you another one.”

He choked out a little laugh as he ducked past me, placing his gun, bat and headgear on the backseat. I slipped his backpack off for him and kept hold of it as I closed the car door. When I got into the passenger seat, the car’s suspension did let out an ominous creak, but the engine started fine when Danny turned the key, and he grinned over at me as I stowed our bags between my knees.

“Travelling in style before we head through an interdimensional portal to a monster world, huh?” Danny reached over and palmed my thigh as he started driving. “You sure do know how to show a man a good time, Wyn.”

I huffed, threading my fingers through his where they rested on my leg. It didn’t take us long to get to the tear, and I could see Danny was unnerved by the sight of all the unconscious soldiers sprawled haphazardly on the ground along the wall’s perimeter.

“At least they’re not dead,” I commented, grabbing Danny’s bag and opening the car door when he killed the engine.

“No, I know.” Danny sounded hesitant as he got out after me and collected the rest of his things from the back seat. “How long will they be unconscious?” he asked as I walked around the car to join him.

I shrugged one shoulder and took the headgear out of his hands to help him put it on. I didn’t expect any of the soldiers to wake up and shoot at us, but better to be safe than sorry. “Several hours.”

Danny fixed his mask over the lower half of his face, but he stopped with his goggles raised halfway to his head. “What will happen to them if a monster comes through?”

I just about resisted the urge to grunt impatiently. “Don’t know.” I helped him put on his goggles.

“Well, what if they get eaten?” Danny sounded worried behind his headgear as he shoved on his helmet.

“Danny.” I handed him his backpack. “My sweet. I can only do so much.” In truth, there was certainly more I could do to ensure the unconscious soldiers stayed safe before they woke up. I could move them all to the watchtowers, at the very least.

Didn’t want to, though.

“No, I know.” Danny shook his head and slung his gun over his shoulder. “Sorry.”

But he still sounded worried, so I sighed and said, “I’m sure they’ll all be fine.” Even though I had absolutely no idea if that was true.

“Okay.” Danny shoved his metal bat in his backpack, the handle sticking up past the zipper, and shrugged on the bag. “So I guess we just walk through? I heard explosions. Were you able to get rid of the mines?”

I nodded. “There weren’t many. It looked like they haven’t replenished them for a while. But there are none now.” I stepped forward and threaded my fingers through his gloved ones. “It’s safe, I promise. I’d never risk it.”

“I know you wouldn’t, old man.” Danny nudged me with his elbow, and I could hear the smile in his voice. “Let’s do this.”

He sounded nervous, but I didn’t comment on it as I led him to the hole left in the wall by the beast that came through a while ago. The roar of the tear was loud this close, and Danny’s head tilted back to stare at it as we reached the gap in the wall.

A long, empty stretch of churned land sat between us and the shimmering slash of energy. At least all the remains of the creatures from my world had been obliterated when I’d set off the remaining mines on the ground. Otherwise, Danny would have had to walk through a sea of bones and rotting entrails to reach the tear.

He gripped my hand tight as we stepped over the rubble of the felled portion of the wall. Neither of us spoke as we headed towards the tear, it was too loud. The closer we got, the stronger the pressure felt on my skull. It was a mild irritant, and I hoped it wasn’t making Danny too uncomfortable. His aura was jumpy with nerves, but otherwise healthy.

I experienced a pang of worry that Danny would despise my world. I didn’t even know why it was so important. It wasn’t like I was particularly interested in us staying there.

It just… felt important.

We stopped when there was nothing but blurry, moving waves of energy in front of us, making me want to squint. Danny gripped my hand tighter.

“Ready?” I had to speak up over the roar of the tear, though it had grown muted and more muffled the closer we got to it. As though we had already stepped within its sphere of strange, not-quite-here energy.

Danny's helmet turned toward me, and he nodded. “I’m ready,” he said, but I could hear the nerves in his voice.

“I will protect you with everything I have, Danny,” I told him, tightening my grip on his fingers. “I’ll look after you.”

Danny’s shoulders untensed. “I know.” He sounded calmer, and I could hear the smile in his voice. He looked at the tear again. “Okay. Let’s do this.”

I turned back to face the tear. This close, I could see the darkness of the grass on the other side, through the rippling air. The haze of pink daylight. It had been a while since I had returned, and a surprising pang of longing tightened my insides. I felt a hint of excitement at being able to show Danny my world. Where I came from.

I squeezed Danny’s hand one last time, then tugged gently to get us moving.

We stepped through together.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Going through the tear in my corporeal form felt like taking a huge stride forward, only to realise there was no ground in front of you—just a drop. It was like your insides were getting sucked out. It was unpleasant, but brief.

The moment we were through, standing on the black-red grass of my world, I turned to make sure Danny was alright.

“Damn.” He reached up and pulled off his helmet, then yanked off his goggles. His dark hair was mussed, blue eyes wide as he looked around. “That was weird.”

“Are you alright?” I took the headgear from him, tying it quickly to the side of his backpack, and smoothed a hand over the back of his head until my palm hit the rough fabric of his mask.

“I’m fine.” He smiled at me from behind the mask, his fingers curling into the front of my shirt to hold onto me. His eyes quickly slid back to the environment around him as he took it in.

I glanced around. I hadn’t been back for a while, but it looked just as it had for eons. I tried to imagine seeing it for the first time through young, human eyes.

During the day, the sky here was a pale pink that deepened to red closer to the horizon. It would turn black when night came, but the twin moons bathed the land in enough light that even Danny would be able to see fairly well.

The earth was dark, and the grass was black with reddish tips. The rocks were a variety of deep, muted colours, except for the crystals that formed in the water. Those glowed in vibrant blues and purples, and I was eager to show Danny because I knew he’d like them.

“Do you need to rest for a while?” I asked him, stepping closer and cupping the side of his neck. His aura pulsed with health and just a hint of fear, but mainly excitement.

He laughed and shook his head, reaching up to tug off his mask. “Wyn, I promise I’m fine. Can you show me around?” he asked, blue eyes bright with excitement.

My lips twitched. I nodded and held out my hand. When Danny took it, I tugged him away from the tear and further into the valley, toward the small

stream that cut through it.

“Hey, look.” Danny pointed at the sooty remains of the small fire I had forced the soldier to make the night before. “Looks like someone’s been here recently.”

I gave a noncommittal grunt and led Danny further down the stream, away from the patch of charred earth, just in case he spotted the bent rifle I’d thrown into the water. The soldier’s helmet was also around here somewhere.

“The water’s safe for you to drink,” I told Danny, “in case you want to fill up your bottle.”

He nodded, only half listening as he stared at the crystals glowing along the edges of the stream. They emerged over thousands of years of flowing water wearing away the rock, minerals building up in endless shades of purple and blue.

“That’s amazing,” Danny said, and a tiny part of me felt inexplicably happy that Danny liked something from my world. I had been worried that he would find it all too unnerving, but his aura remained healthy and light, filling me with relief.

“I suppose,” I drawled, instead of voicing any of that.

Danny chuckled. “I’m sure after twelve thousand years, not much is all that amazing anymore, huh?” He grinned over at me. “Father Time.”

I huffed, moving behind him to wrap my arms around his middle, pulling him back into me. The handle of his stupid baseball bat pressed into my shoulder. “Some things are.”

“You know if I tell anyone all the sweet shit you say to me, no one’s gonna be scared of you anymore.”

I bared my teeth in a not-quite grin, leaning my head down to graze them over the shell of Danny’s ear. “Then you better not tell anyone.”

He laughed. “I won’t. I promise.” His elbow nudged my stomach. “Can’t have that carefully cultivated reputation as an unfeeling, bloodthirsty murderer being damaged.”

“I didn’t carefully cultivate anything.” I kissed the side of his head before stepping back. “I just didn’t bother to correct any assumptions.”

Danny laughed again. “Right.”

He crouched at the water’s edge and peered closely at the crystals. He looked up at me as he stripped off his gloves and shoved them in his back pocket. “You said it’s safe to drink?”

I nodded, watching in silence as he dipped his fingers in the water. Then he pulled his canteen from his bag and unscrewed the lid. After taking a long drink, he plunged it into the water to refill it.

"So." Danny grinned up at me again as he waited for the bottle to fill. "What's the plan, baby?"

I shrugged one shoulder, fingers twitching at my sides. "We start walking."

Danny laughed and nodded, looking back down as he lifted his bottle from the water and screwed on the lid. "We'll just be doing it with a change of scenery, huh?" He stowed away his bottle and stood up. "You still gonna take me to a city afterwards, like you promised?"

I huffed, amused. "I don't believe I *promised* anything."

Danny sputtered. "If I'm going to stay alive for four thousand years to keep you company, the least you can do is show me a good time."

I wheezed, tangling my fingers through his and tugging him forward as I led him toward the entrance to the valley. "Exactly what kind of city are you picturing?"

"Um, I'm not picturing *anything* because I have absolutely no frame of reference for what a city in another world might look like. That's why I *want to go see one*."

"I told you. Maybe after the Caen an Sin."

"I'll bitch the whole way back to the human world if you don't take me. Just so you know."

"I assure you, I'll keep that in mind."

Danny fell silent as he looked around while we walked, taking in the dark rock jutting violently from the earth either side of us. Truthfully, there wasn't all that much to see in the valley. Just rocks, some lyteg trees, some otya bushes and the stream. Not many creatures lived in the valley, mainly small things like wanuks, and those that did stayed far away from me. The tear was the most interesting thing down here, and it was barely visible from a distance. Just a jagged shimmer in the air.

"So this is where all the monsters came through into the country twenty years ago, huh?" Danny sounded a little unnerved. "It's so strange to think about."

I looked over at him as we walked, giving his fingers a gentle squeeze. "You don't remember any of it, do you?"

He shook his head. “Nah. My momma just put me in the car and drove down to New Orleans when the news broke in our area. I didn’t even see any monsters for real until I joined the military. Just blurry footage on the TV.”

I knew Danny’s mother had sheltered him as best she could. He had worked from a fairly young age—it sounded like most human children had to in the cities—but he had been insulated from the worst of what was happening, judging by everything he had told me of his life before he joined the military. I was grateful that his mother had loved him so much. Had protected him. And I was determined to keep him from having to become hard and cruel, like so many humans did out here.

“She took good care of you,” I said, just because I knew Danny liked to talk about her sometimes.

The sweet smile he shot me sent a pang through me. “Yeah, she did.” His expression morphed into a sly grin. “She also wouldn’t have been scared of threatening to beat your ass if you didn’t treat me good, no matter how terrifying your reputation is.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

The ground had sloped beneath our feet, and soon we emerged out of the valley. The land was largely flat here, though the sharp peaks of the Arin Mountains jutted in the distance toward the north. We would be heading east, to the Yawning Sea, where the Caen an Sin sat alone in its temperamental waters.

“It’s kind of remote here,” Danny commented as I led him in the right direction.

“Yes.”

He huffed a laugh. “Is that why you lived here?”

“Yes.”

Danny let out a proper laugh and squeezed my hand as we walked. It was mild, so I wasn’t worried about him getting cold. His aura was still warm and bright. He seemed endearingly charmed by my world so far, and fascinated by all of it.

The knot of worry in my chest loosened just a bit. I grew more convinced that this would work. The tether would work.

I resisted the urge to stop and pull Danny into the cradle of my arms, just to feel his solid warmth against me. To breathe him in. Sometimes it felt like he wasn’t real and I had to confirm to myself all over again that he was.

I had a brief moment of wishing that I could show Danny my nest. That after we had tethered our lives, I could take him there and we could hide away for a few years. A hundred. Maybe five hundred.

But other than smashing through deep rock, there was no way for him to get inside. We couldn't, anyway. Danny wouldn't have let me neglect my duty to keep the parasites at bay in his world.

As though attracted by the very thought, an irritating little buzz began at the back of my skull. My shoulders went stiff, and I tried to block him out, but it was too late.

The hunt ended ages ago, Wyn. Where have you been? Orlith's voice rang in my head, as grating as ever.

I rolled my eyes, barely suppressing my exasperated huff. He was so nosy.

I decided to stay, I told him shortly. *Why aren't you asleep?*

I was waiting for you, he replied.

I grunted internally, confused why he would do that. *Were you worried about me?*

No, he shot back immediately. *Of course not. Just curious. You have never stayed longer than you needed to before. None of us have. That place is depressing*.

I grunted again. *Well, I decided to.*

There was a long silence in my mind, but I could feel Orlith still in there, his presence pressing insistently against the back of my skull. Like an annoying little fish, darting about in my head, trying to look at everything.

Something's different, he said eventually, his flat voice suspicious.

No, it isn't, I answered quickly.

Yes, he countered straight away. *It is. Something is different with you. I'm coming to see you*.

No— I began, but he was already gone. I gritted my teeth. Fucking Orlith, too nosy for his own good.

It looked like Danny would be meeting one of the others, then.

"Hey, old man, what's the rush?" Danny tugged on my hand with a laugh, trying to get me to slow down. "I want to look at things."

I clenched my jaw but slowed my pace. It wasn't like we could outrun another telyth anyway, not when I was in this form and Orlith was no doubt speeding here in a stream of smoke, eager to insert himself into my business.

Just moments later, I felt him approaching. An unfamiliar wave of mild panic tightened my insides. Orlith was bound to say something embarrassing in front of Danny. He was worse than Edin, because he didn't even try to embarrass me on purpose.

I cleared my throat and brought us to a stop, turning to face Danny. "Someone is coming here."

Danny stared back at me. "Huh?"

"Someone is… There is someone on their way here now to see me. Us."

His face didn't clear. "Uh… who?"

I clenched my jaw. "He's a telyth. Like me."

"A telyth?" Danny's brows hiked up. "Is that the name for your kind?" He gave my shoulder a weak shove. "You've never told me that."

"I didn't know you were interested."

Danny rolled his eyes. I was sure if there had been a way to roll one's eyes *harder*, he would have done it. "Of course I'm interested!"

I wasn't sure what to say to that, so I just shrugged. "Well. That's what I am."

Soul Eater was a name that humans had given my kind, but some creatures from this world had adopted it too since crossing over. I thought it made me sound more ominous, so I didn't mind it. Plus, I didn't care enough to correct any of them.

"So another Soul Eater is on their way here right now?" Danny swallowed and looked around as if Orlith would appear out of thin air. Which he would.

"Yes, and he's a brat," I ground out. "He'll probably—"

"I'm not a brat."

My shoulders hunched up when Orlith's grating voice came from behind me. I gripped Danny's hand tighter and reluctantly turned us to face him.

At least he was wearing a normal coat this time; plain black, floor-length, with the hood up. He liked to steal new coats—and other things that caught his eye—from the human world and hoard them in his nest. He'd once gifted me a ridiculous, jewel-encrusted cloak he'd stolen from an English king centuries ago.

I had obviously never worn it.

Orlith's horns were smoother than mine, except for a second jagged spike that jutted up on either side of his head. I knew he thought those extra protrusions made him look *regal*. His black markings extended past his wrists, rather than just staining his fingertips like mine did. Beneath his hood he had white hair and a black eye just like mine, while his other was silver.

We stood in silence for a few moments. Danny was staring, and I could tell that he was unnerved by seeing another like me.

I could feel Orlith staring back. His black fingers twitched. "You have a human with you," he said in our language.

As if I wasn't aware. "Yes," I replied in English. I wasn't going to exclude Danny from this conversation, even if there was a chance of Orlith embarrassing me. I gripped his hand tighter.

Orlith's hood cocked slowly, and I felt his eyes travel down to our linked hands. "Is it… your new pet?" he asked, in English this time—probably just to be a little shit. Orlith's patch in the human world was Europe, so he heard the language fairly often.

Danny stiffened with indignation beside me.

"No," I said quickly. "He's not a *pet*. He's my…" I struggled to think of the word. "My partner. He's mine."

"Your partner?" Orlith straightened. "Your lover? You have a *human lover*?"

"Okay, maybe we can tone down the horrified shock in our voices," Danny grumbled, looking between me and Orlith with a frown.

"Yes, Orlith, Danny is my *human lover*." My tone was scathing. "Are you done worming your way into things that are nothing to do with you now?"

"You two fuck?" Orlith's flat voice lifted with curiosity. "That's interesting. What's that like?"

I gritted my teeth. "It's none of your fucking business."

He cocked his head. I knew he was eyeing Danny. "How would you procreate? Who would bear the young?"

Danny's face went ashen, and he turned to stare at me with wide eyes.

"Orlith, please shut the fuck up," I grated, clutching Danny's hand tighter.

Orlith sniffed and folded his arms over his chest. “I was just *wondering*. I always assumed that one day you and I would procreate, Wyn. I was just waiting for you to express that you were ready for offspring.”

“Wait, what?” Danny began, looking between us. “Are you—”

“When have I ever given any indication that I wish to procreate, let alone with you?” I said to Orlith, and his shoulders stiffened in offence.

“Why wouldn’t you?” he countered sulkily. “It’s not like any of us have many options left. And I *am* the youngest, and the best looking.”

Danny cleared his throat. “So you two are—”

“No,” I interrupted, squeezing Danny’s fingers. “Orlith just assumes the rest of us are competing for his attention. We’re not.”

“Evidently not,” Orlith muttered without inflection. After an awkward silence, he begrudgingly added, “Your human pet is very pretty.”

“I told you, he’s not—” When Danny squeezed my hand to indicate that it wasn’t worth getting into how Orlith might incorrectly interpret our relationship, I stopped and rolled my eyes. “Thank you.”

Orlith perked up, arms falling to his sides. “Would you be willing to let me—”

“I will rip your tongue out with my bare hands if you finish that sentence,” I seethed, tugging Danny back a step so I was partially in front of him.

I could just tell that Orlith was making a face within his hood. “Alright, fine. I didn’t mean it offensively.”

“How could that *not* be offensive, you utter prick?”

Orlith sniffed. “I always forget how irritable you are,” he said, turning to leave. “Human, I find myself strangely interested in you. If you ever get sick of Wyn and his foul moods, come and find me.”

Danny spluttered in disbelief. “I won’t, but… thanks?”

I snarled, a low, ominous rumble emerging from my throat, until Orlith dissipated and left in a writhing stream of black smoke.

“Jesus,” Danny muttered, tightening his grip on my hand and dragging me forward as he started walking again. “All your friends are *so* weird.”

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Our journey progressed very slowly, because Danny wanted to stop and look at everything.

Absolutely everything.

If I didn't love him so much, I would have already told him—several times—that not every plant or rock or bug warranted a thorough inspection and ten questions. *Is it poisonous? What are those spikes for? Will it bite me? Why does it look like a dick?*

I hadn't thought it was possible for a being my age to learn new skills, but Danny was certainly teaching me how to be more patient. He was just so… *eager*. He soaked up the world like a sponge. It was endearing.

But also mildly infuriating when we had somewhere to be.

"My sweet, I can show you everything in explicit detail *after* we've been to the Caen an Sin," I told him, gently tugging him away from a dros tree. He was fascinated by the long tendrils that trailed from the branches to the ground, covered in what looked like sticky dew, to scoop up unsuspecting critters that crawled too close to its trunk.

"Okay, sorry." Danny looked back longingly at the tree even as he let me lead him away, back onto the path we were following. It was rarely used, nothing more than a faint furrow in the red-black grass.

We hadn't come across anyone or anything since Orlith left, for which I was profoundly grateful. I doubted it would last, but at least we were in a remote corner of the world. Not many wanted to live this close to the Caen an Sin, where the two mabs sent their thunderous anger rumbling through the sky and ground. It was why I had nested here in the first place, and why *my* tear had remained undiscovered by most for so long. Until it had widened and attracted creatures from all over to the valley.

My presence here for millennia may have also had something to do with why creatures avoided living nearby, but that was just a happy coincidence.

"The air smells different here," Danny commented, clinging to my hand as we walked. He was still looking around at everything, so he kept tripping over his own feet while I practically held him upright.

"Does it?" I hadn't noticed. "What does it smell like?"

“Kind of like bonfires. Or burning leaves. It smells good. It reminds me of you.” He grinned over at me. Warmth flowed through me, but I said nothing, just gripped his hand tighter.

We walked in silence for a while, and I found myself strangely enjoying just being back in my world. I normally didn’t care. I normally came back here just to sleep until the next hunt. It wasn’t like I often went travelling around anyway, unless I had been visiting Orlith in the past.

As though he somehow knew I’d thought about the annoying other telyth, Danny cleared his throat. “So… Orlith,” he began, and I wanted to squirm as foreboding clenched my insides. “Have you two ever…”

Fuck.

“Yes,” I grated at length. I couldn’t lie to Danny. “But the last time was several hundred years ago, Danny. And it was only a few times. He’s an irritating, self-centred prick.” I forced myself to stop talking, painfully aware of the supplicating edge in my voice.

Danny chuckled. “I want to be jealous—and I am—but at the same time it feels silly when it hasn’t happened for hundreds of years.”

I actually quite liked the thought of Danny being jealous, but I wasn’t sure if humans found that strange or wrong, so I didn’t voice it. “It was purely an arrangement for the sake of convenience,” I told him. “There were no—”

I stopped myself. I’d been about to tell Danny that there had been no deeper feelings, and there hadn’t on my part. But apparently Orlith had been harbouring the hope that we would one day join and have offspring together. I wanted to roll my eyes at how arrogant he was. In his mind, I obviously had to be pining for him because we’d fucked a few times.

Danny lifted our linked hands to his mouth and kissed the back of mine. “Wyn, you’re like, twelve-thousand years old. It’s not like I was under the impression that you’d lived as a monk before meeting me.”

The tight knot of worry in my chest loosened. I swayed closer to Danny as we walked, disentangling my hand so I could wrap my arm around his shoulders.

I kissed the top of his head, breathing in the scent of his hair. “I love you.”

Danny chuckled, slipping his arm beneath my coat to wrap around my waist. “I know. I love you, too.”

“Do you need to stop and rest?” I asked him, tugging him even closer. “Are you hungry? Thirsty?”

I spotted some lyteg trees nearby and felt a sly smile twitch my lips. “Want to try some fruit from this world?” I asked Danny, wanting to give him something I knew he’d find exciting.

He perked up. “What? Yes. Can I?”

I nodded, kissing his head once more before walking over to pluck a drupe from the tree. I returned to him and held it out. “It’s safe.”

Danny took it without questioning further, which made me both love him even more and also flinch internally. Living in the Wastes had changed him somewhat, making him a little tougher and more world-weary, but he was still sweetly naïve. And unflinchingly loyal to me, trusting me implicitly. It made me forever grateful that he wanted to be with me, because the thought of him falling prey to anyone who would take advantage of his gentle nature made me want to murder things. All the things.

I would never betray his trust. My entire being rebelled at the very idea of it.

“Doesn’t look the most appetising,” Danny said with a grin, turning the warty fruit over in his hands. “Can I eat the skin?”

When I nodded, he lifted it to his mouth and took a big bite, white teeth sinking easily into the soft, pale purple flesh inside the bumpy skin. Juice dripped to his chin, and my fingers twitched with my desire to lick it up before Danny raised his free hand and quickly wiped it away.

He chewed slowly and swallowed, then grinned at me. “It’s really good. Tastes like a peach crossed with a blueberry.”

I had never eaten either of those things, so I just shrugged.

He took another bite, eyes wandering with interest again. They lit up. “Can I try that too?” he asked, pointing with the lyteg fruit in his hand to something behind me.

I turned and saw what he was pointing at. The dalgit bush had brown leaves feathered with orange spines, and bright orange, pearl-like berries that grew in long, thin clusters up tall stems. It was colourful and ostentatious, so I could see why Danny had spotted it.

It was also incredibly toxic to everything but a few species that had evolved specially to ingest the fruit.

“No.” I turned back to Danny. “Those berries are caustic. They will eat through your guts.”

“Oh.” He went pale and swallowed his mouthful of fruit. “Okay.”

I wanted to laugh. “Don’t worry,” I said, stepping closer to scratch affectionately at the back of his head. “I will show you what you can eat.” I leaned down to kiss his temple.

“I know.” Danny wiped his mouth. “Sorry if I ask stupid questions anyway.”

I rolled my eyes as I took a step back so Danny could finish his fruit. “They’re not stupid.”

“Does this have a pit?” he asked, taking a smaller bite. “Oh wait, I see it.”

He carefully finished around the smooth purple pit, then held it as he looked around awkwardly. “Um, where do I…”

My mouth twitched. “Here.” I took the stone and chucked it.

Danny shot me a mock glare as his cheeks went pink. “I don’t want to litter in your world, Wyn.”

I wheezed a laugh. “Of course not.” I leaned down and kissed his cheek, then took his hand again. “Come on.”

“So how long do days last here?” Danny asked me as we set off on the path again. “Does it get dark?”

I nodded. “Yes, the sky gets dark.” I looked up, feeling my hood slip back a little. Danny lunged over to kiss the side of my mouth while it was visible, and my lips pulled into a reluctant smile. “We have a few hours of daylight left.” I looked over at him, tugging him closer. “Don’t worry. I’ll look after you.”

“Oh, I’m not *worried*.” Danny shot me a look—one I knew well. It made my insides pulse with the first sweet pull of arousal.

My mouth stretched into a wicked grin. “I’ll find us somewhere for you to rest, sweet.”

“Not just rest, though, right?” Danny’s voice had taken on that husky quality it got when he was thinking about sex. My body was conditioned to respond to it now, and my fingers twitched with my desire to haul him up against me and ravish him.

“No, not just rest,” I rasped.

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CHAPTER NINE

In the end, I found us a tiny, abandoned stone cottage that was older than I was. Danny looked around with interest while I sat down on the cold stone floor with my back to the wall, resting my forearms over my knees. When Danny realised there was nothing to look at in there—it had been abandoned for centuries—he hurriedly drank some water and wolfed down a protein bar before pouncing on me.

I grinned against his mouth as he kissed me, but I had to be mindful of my teeth. Danny pushed my hood back so he could see my face, and then my head was thunking back against the wall as he trailed hot, feverish kisses down my neck. My horns scraped against the stone, but I barely heard it as my heart started to pound.

Danny unbuttoned my shirt on his way down, grinning up at me before lowering his head to kiss and lick the scarred skin. I bared my teeth in a pleasured snarl, everything in me tightening with arousal, and reached down to thread my fingers through his soft hair.

“God, I’ve been wanting your dick all day,” Danny rasped as he undid my pants with deft hands.

I huffed in amusement. “Nothing better to think about?” I asked, raking my fingers through Danny’s hair.

He didn’t answer, both of us becoming distracted. My brows pinched with anticipation as I avidly watched Danny tug my pants down, and he made a low, hungry noise as he dipped his head to lick me, along the full length of my slit. I gritted my teeth, hips already wanting to strain up toward his mouth. He licked again, moaning as the tip of his tongue caressed me just inside. I jerked as it tickled the tip of my cock, which started pushing out insistently.

Danny moved his head back to watch as it emerged, eyes flashing at the sight of it bobbing over my tense, scarred stomach. He leaned back in to kiss the tip before running his tongue up my length, through the wetness coating it. I jerked, grunting at the feel.

Sometimes Danny liked to take his time when he did this, making me snarl and pant until I finally fisted his hair and half-begged, half-ordered

him to let me come. But sometimes, like now, when he was already intoxicatingly hungry for me, he didn't make either of us wait.

I hissed when he sucked my cock into his mouth with a moan, fingers restlessly gripping my thighs. The hot, wet suction was exquisite, sending sparks of ecstasy down my cock all the way to the base inside me, which pulsed in reaction. Danny moaned again around my length before he lowered his hands to undo his own pants with jerky, frantic motions. Fingers tightening in his hair, I tilted my head against the wall so I could watch him fist his own hard cock and start to stroke in time with his head bobbing over mine.

I could tell it wouldn't take him long. His sac was already high and tight, and I could see the side of his finger gleaming with the pre-cum that was spilling from his tip and being smoothed down his shaft with every pump of his fist. I snarled at the sight, mouth watering to taste him. Danny's hips gave a helpless jerk in reaction to the sound. The suction engulfing my cock increased, making me strain toward his mouth.

"Danny." My voice was even more distorted than normal. I clenched my fingers tighter in his hair, knees falling open wider as I watched the length of my pale cock vanishing inside his beautiful pink mouth, over and over. My chest heaved with my snarling, panting breaths. I ached to hold his head still and thrust until the pressure released, but I didn't. I let him build it up slower, but it still rushed up on me. The wet sounds of Danny's mouth sucking me, coupled with his low, hungry noises and his fist working his own cock, made the heat inside me expand in a rush.

"Danny," I rasped again between gritted teeth, trying not to grip his hair too tight as my body started to shake. My cock was already pulsing, my insides tightening as the orgasm was forced up by Danny's hungry mouth.

He made an even tighter seal with his mouth as he sucked almost completely off my cock. He moaned low as he wound his tongue around the head, licking the tiny slit, and that was all it took.

I let out an inhuman snarl as my hips jerked, sinking my cock deeper into his mouth. My release burst from me, filling Danny's mouth, not stopping when he *mmm*'ed and kept sucking, tongue sliding over the sensitive V on the underside. I shuddered hard, sliding my fingers from his hair to his nape, holding him in place until the last of my orgasm spurted from me.

When a modicum of awareness returned, I looked down past my heaving chest to see Danny licking the sensitive place where my cock emerged from my body, making me shudder. His fist flew over his own length as he trembled. He was seconds away from coming.

“Wait,” I barked. He stopped moving immediately, lifting his head to look up at me with stark, aroused eyes, the blue so much deeper when he was like this. He trembled, hand squeezing the base of his shaft. Pre-cum dripped from the head to the floor between his knees.

“Come here, Danny.” My voice was low and even more inhuman than normal off the back of the intense pleasure, and I saw Danny shiver in reaction as he scrambled to obey.

I got him where I wanted him, in my lap with his back to my front. Nuzzling his ear, gently tugging the soft lobe, I stared hungrily at his cock. It was an iron spike on his belly, beautifully flushed against the black of his shirt. A bead of pre-cum welled and slid down the length, making my mouth water.

Danny’s chest was heaving with anticipation, and he gripped my knees with restless hands. I could feel a wicked smile stretching my mouth as I grazed my teeth over the shell of his ear. “Pants to your ankles, Danny.”

He scrambled to obey, sitting forward to shove them down before leaning back against me. I reached around him to spread his knees wide, then slid my palms up his inner thighs. He shuddered at the feel, cock jumping against his belly.

“I won’t make you wait, sweet,” I told him, nuzzling the hinge of his jaw as I squeezed his inner thigh with my left hand, while my right trailed lightly up his rigid length.

Danny gasped out a desperate sound, hips already straining. I grinned against his neck.

“Well, maybe I’ll make you wait a little,” I rasped, sliding my fingertips through the wetness coating the tip of his cock. I concentrated on the sensitive head for long moments until Danny was twitching in my lap, hands gripping my knees restlessly, almost at the point of oversensitivity.

I made a fist around his cock. “Fuck,” Danny gasped, his hips thrusting up to meet my hand as it came down on his shaft. I bit back a groan at the sight, my left hand tightening on Danny’s taut inner thigh in a restless grip. My eyes were glued to my hand as it slid up and down his stiff cock.

He groaned again, his head falling back onto my shoulder. His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed, neck stretched. I stilled my hand just to hear him whimper in protest, his hips jerking up to try and keep the friction going.

I huffed in amusement and bit down gently on his neck as I trailed my fingertips over the slick crown in the lightest of touches. Danny's breath caught in his throat, and he lifted his head to look down and watch.

Pre-cum pulsed from the tip as his hips twitched. "Uunnh fuck," he gritted out through clenched teeth, fingers like claws against my knees.

I ran the blackened tip of my finger over the slit, spreading the fresh wetness. I did it again until another clear drop welled. Then another. I didn't stop until Danny was almost sobbing with lust, knees spread wide and ankles still trapped together by his pants. His hips writhed, bucking up as though that would help him get more friction.

I finally took mercy on him and wrapped my fingers around his crown, smiling at the sound he made. I kept my hand still and let Danny work his cock through it, fresh arousal pulsing through me as I watched the slick, pink head disappear and reappear from the top of my fist.

I slid my left hand up his inner thigh until I could cup his balls, stroking the tight sac. Then I extended my middle finger to press it against his tender hole.

"Oh fuck," Danny breathed, hips instinctively tilting to give me easier access. He shuddered hard when I stroked his hole again, keeping my touch gentle. I started pumping my other hand fast, eager to see him come. I revelled in the urgent moans escaping Danny's lips and the feel of his hands gripping my knees tighter and tighter.

"Will you come for me now, Danny?" I rasped against his ear, my own erection pulsing insistently against his lower back. I ignored it, focusing instead on the slick sounds of my fist pumping his cock. It was like a steel bar beneath my fingers, so hot and throbbing with life.

"F-f-fuck—Wyn—" Danny raised a hand to clench my hair, hips bucking up with every downward stroke of my fist. He sucked in a sharp gasp. Then moaned. Then shouted as his cock throbbed in my fist and long ribbons of cum started spurting from the tip, stark white against the black of his shirt.

I moaned into his neck at the sight, squeezing my fist in the way I knew Danny liked. My fingertip continued rubbing in a soft, constant rhythm

against his hole, and I could feel it twitching with his orgasm.

I bared my teeth in a pleasured snarl. Danny was exquisite.

He was also wrung out and almost falling asleep as he slumped back against me, knees sprawled wide and arms limp by his sides.

I heard his dry throat click as he swallowed. “I got cum on my shirt.”

I huffed, palming his inner thighs and giving them a gentle squeeze. “Yes.” A lot of it. “We’ll clean it off.”

Danny exhaled a long, sated breath, absently spinning the ring on my right thumb, which he tended to do when we were lying in bed together. He turned his head to nuzzle my neck and jaw.

“I better do it now before I fall asleep. Crossing between worlds has made me tired. Well, that and the monster orgasm you just gave me.” I felt his elbow nudge my belly. “Get it? *Monster* orgasm.”

“You’ve made that joke before. Several times.”

“I know, and it’s still funny.”

I rolled my eyes and gave him a little shove. “Go and sort yourself out. You’re a mess,” I deadpanned, and Danny snickered as he heaved himself up from my lap with endearing awkwardness.

When the perfect, pale globes of his ass appeared in front of me, I grabbed his hips and leaned forward to give him a gentle bite on one cheek, just to hear Danny yelp as he scrambled to get his pants back up.

I snickered, giving both cheeks a firm pat before lowering my hands to do up my own pants then rebutton my shirt. Once Danny had cleaned himself up and had a sip of water, he returned to the cradle of my lap. It didn’t take him long to fall asleep. I closed my eyes, savouring the feel of his warm breaths against the base of my throat, and the rise and fall of his back beneath my hands.

The realisation that I might get to have this for the rest of my life made my throat ache. I held him closer and pressed my nose and mouth to the top of his head, content to breathe him in for the hours that he slept.

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CHAPTER TEN

Danny was not an elegant sleeper.

By the time faint pink, murky light crept through the small windows of the stone house, he was sprawled haphazardly over me and snoring into my neck. I could feel his drool seeping through my shirt.

My back against the wall, I gazed up at the ceiling, drawing absent patterns on his back as I tried to work out how much distance we'd likely cover over the course of the day. It all depended on whether Danny would be as eager to stop and look at *every little thing* again, and whether we would be accosted by any other irritating, bratty telyths. The latter was far less likely than the former. I didn't think Orlith would bother us again—he was probably sulking in his nest cluttered with stolen human trinkets.

My right leg—the one that wasn't trapped between Danny's—was cocked, my boot tapping restlessly on the ground. It wasn't that I wanted Danny to move. I adored holding him. But I was still getting used to being awake and motionless for this long. Before, when I slept between hunts, it was more of a hibernation, and when I was awake, I was active. Constantly moving. I was lazier now that I was with Danny, but I… enjoyed it. It was nice to just *be*.

In the end, our first night in my world had been a quiet one. I often half-slept when I stayed with Danny at night in the human world, but I'd decided to stay fully conscious just in case anything approached the cottage. Something had let out a low, warbling howl from far away at one point, but it had sounded more like a mating call than a creature hunting for prey.

Danny stirred in my arms, sucking in a breath as he started waking up. He stretched and smacked me in the face with the back of his wrist.

"Sorry," he mumbled, settling back down and rubbing his nose against my throat. I knew he was about to fall back to sleep, so I scratched gently at the back of his head.

"We should get moving soon, my sweet."

Danny groaned. "Okay, I'm up," he croaked, twisting around so his back was to my front, seated on the ground between my thighs, and stretched again. I rubbed my nose in his hair, breathing in his sleep-warmed scent as I

stretched my leg out to snag his backpack with my boot. I dragged it closer until he could reach it and get his water. “Thanks,” he said.

He took a long drink. When his stomach rumbled, my mouth twitched. “You have plenty of MREs, or I can gather some fruit. Or meat?” I asked, snaking one hand around to slip it under his shirt and rest it on his flat belly. My fingers played with the tantalising line of hair that descended from his navel.

Danny rubbed his eyes, taking a while to answer. He wasn’t a morning person. “Some more fruit would be nice.”

I patted his side, indicating I needed him to shift off my lap, and brushed off my coat as I stood up. “I’ll be back,” I said, and dissipated to go and gather some otya berries this time, the other fruit that the soldier had tried. I brought back a fat bunch of the deep green berries and held them out to Danny as I resolidified sitting cross-legged in front of him.

He didn’t even flinch, just yawned and scratched at his chest. He was used to me appearing out of nowhere. “Thanks.”

He took them from me and plucked one free. They were larger than the grapes from his world, round and speckled. When Danny bit into one, the flesh inside was firm and dark green.

“Tastes kind of like figs.” He smiled at me. There was still a faint pink line on his cheek from the crease of my shirt, and I resisted the urge to reach out and trace it with my fingertips. “I like them.”

I just smiled back, not bothering to tell him that it was utterly pointless describing its taste to me. I hadn’t eaten, hadn’t tried any of them, for millennia—so long that I had forgotten what these things tasted like. My kind ate only a little as adolescents, though food and drink wasn’t necessary for us to grow, as we absorbed the majority of our nutrients through other means. Mostly, we tried things as children out of pure curiosity.

But Danny already knew that. For some reason, humans just enjoyed contextualising their new experiences into things they were more familiar with.

With any other human, I would have told them to shut up. With Danny, I found it sweet. It gave me wonderful insight into how his mind worked. I hungrily consumed any scrap of information on how Danny processed things with his human mind, because sometimes, it was vastly different to how I would. Sometimes it was surprisingly similar.

“When you’re ready, we’ll set off,” I told him, and Danny nodded as he ate some more berries.

“Don’t suppose this place has a bathroom?” he teased.

“It will have some form of one, even though this place is older than I am,” I said, unable to keep the hint of smugness from my voice. “Just because it took humans a while to come up with the concept of plumbing doesn’t mean it took *us* that long.”

Danny laughed, popping the last berry into his mouth. “Okay, I’m sorry for the prejudice.”

I grunted and scratched the back of his head before getting up to check. I found the tiny room at the back of the cottage, separated by a crumbling wooden door. It had a narrow but deep bath sunk into the ground, and a simple stone latrine.

I made my way back to Danny and told him where it was. “I’ll wait outside,” I said, raising my hood over my head and grabbing his bat and gun before heading out of the cottage.

The day was mild again, and the air was warmer as we got closer to the Zoli Basin, where hot springs bubbled and giant crystals formed from the mineral build-up.

We would reach the basin today, provided Danny didn’t slow us down too much with his insatiable curiosity. And that meant there would be a chance we’d come across others. Creatures journeyed to the Zoli pools to bathe in their waters, which were regarded as a sacred place, believed to bring health and vitality.

They didn’t. They were just hot springs.

Danny joined me a few minutes later, adjusting the straps of his backpack as he emerged from the little cottage, his headgear tied to the side of his bag. After he slung on his gun and tucked his bat into his bag with the handle sticking out, we linked hands and started walking without saying anything. Danny seemed chipper. I knew he’d slept well—because he’d done it on top of me—and he was always in an exceptionally good mood the morning after an orgasm.

He was also just as insatiably curious as he had been the day before.

“That thing is gnarly,” he said, pointing at a nearby hona plant. I could see why it had caught his eye—it didn’t really look like anything Danny would have seen in his world. The bulk of the plant was a large, black-red

ball covered in white protrusions that opened and closed rhythmically, to mimic the twitching wings of a rosir bug.

“Yes.” I caved, feeding his curiosity, and tugged Danny closer to the plant. “It attracts its prey by mimicking the rosir bug.” I pointed to one of the white protrusions, then at a nearby lyteg tree, where a real rosir was fluttering beneath its boughs, its fluffy white wings shivering.

Danny nodded, leaning forward to peer closer. He glanced down warily. “It looks like it’s sitting on a giant black lily pad,” he said, boots touching the edge of the plant’s flat surface. “Is it safe to step on?”

“For us. We’re too big. But smaller creatures, if they step on the pad to try and eat what they think is a rosir, they get stuck. The pad has little hooks that come up when triggered by pressure.”

“Oh shit. Then what? They get eaten?” He gave the hona an uneasy look. “You have a lot of carnivorous plants here.”

I huffed. “Yes. And yes. Tendrils emerge from the base of the plant, here. See?” I pointed at the bottom of the ball, where the tentacle-like mouth of the plant was just visible. “They slowly drag the trapped prey into the centre of the plant to be digested.”

“Damn.” Danny took a step back from the hona, still staring at it. “Don’t you have any plants that are just like… roses? You know, they have nice flowers and that’s about it?”

I wheezed a tiny laugh and pulled Danny away to get him walking again. “Yes. We have flowering plants, and pollinators.” I squeezed his hand, perking up internally at the thought of what I could show him. “There is a flower you’ll like where we’re heading. I’ll show you when we get there.”

Danny grinned over at me. “Yeah?” He raised our linked hands to kiss my knuckles. “I can’t wait.”

I grunted to hide how pleased that made me. We walked in comfortable silence for a while. The air started to grow more humid as we got closer to the Zoli Basin, and steam rose from the increasingly jungle-like forest to our left, curling into the pale-pink sky. Danny rolled up the sleeves of his tight black shirt as the temperature rose, revealing the golden-skinned, corded muscles of his forearms, dusted with dark hair. The faint, scarred ring of teeth marks from a parasite’s bite was just barely visible. My gut clenched at the sight. Danny had beautiful arms and hands. His fingers were long and strong, with big knuckles and delicate veins.

Had I ever told him?

I was about to, when movement to the side of the path caught my eye. Danny noticed it too, because he went still before letting out a little sound. “Look at that thing!”

I’d spotted it, and I had absolutely no idea why Danny sounded so excited. It was just a nask, a fat, unremarkable little creature. It was making its way in the direction we’d come, moving very, very slowly with its jerky, back-and-forth walk that was meant to help it blend into the gentle movements of the grass and dropped foliage on the forest floor.

“Mm,” I said in response, unimpressed when Danny let go of my hand to crouch down and inspect it. With much reluctance, I squatted down beside him and stared with disinterest at the slow-moving nask, which ignored us completely.

“Is it a baby?” Danny asked.

“No. It’s a fully grown nask.” This one was probably a hundred or so years old, judging by its markings.

“It’s so dang cute!”

I side-eyed Danny, then looked back at the nask. Nasks were not *cute*. They had squat, rotund little bodies with stubby limbs and disproportionately tiny heads, complete with bulbous eyes. Their skin was black and leathery, with deep red markings striping its back and a bright red underbelly. They were usually much fatter, which meant this one had recently woken up from a long hibernation and was now on a listless hunt to find something to eat and another nask to mate with.

“I thought humans found things like tinier humans *cute*.” I couldn’t help but sneer the word. “And infant animals. Things that are too young and stupid to look after themselves.”

Danny snorted. “Yeah, most people do. But this is just… weird and ugly and cute.”

I gazed at my sweet, strange human. I supposed I should count myself lucky that he had an unusual soft spot for ugly things.

I dropped a kiss on his temple and stood up, stretching my neck as I waited for Danny to follow. He didn’t. Instead, he stared at the nask for a moment longer, then looked up at me, nibbling his bottom lip.

My fingers twitched. “No.”

He went still before narrowing his eyes at me. “I didn’t say anything.”

“I know exactly what you are thinking, Danny.” I folded my arms over my chest. “No.”

His face turned an adorable shade of pink. “You just said it’s not a baby! So it’s not like we’d be taking it from its mother.” He looked back down at the nask. “What if it just, like, started followin’ us? Then it wouldn’t be my fault. And it—”

“It won’t.”

He glared at me. “It might!”

My mouth twitched. “It won’t.”

Danny sighed and looked back at the nask. “I never got to have a dog when I was a kid,” he said in the voice he thought got him what he wanted. To be fair, it did usually work.

“This isn’t a dog.” I wheezed a chuckle. “It’s not going to become your best friend. It’s a wild creature.”

“Okay, okay!” Danny was still adorably flushed as he stood up and straightened his shirt. “I wasn’t being serious.”

I was glad my mouth was hidden under my hood when it twitched. “Of course not.”

“Wait.” He turned his head to look back toward the direction we’d come from. “What if it gets too close to that ball plant? And gets eaten?”

“Then it gets eaten.”

He looked stricken. “Can’t we like, nudge it in the opposite direction?” We both looked down at the nask as it made its way through the grass with its painfully slow, jerky, dance-like strut.

My fingers twitched. In all likelihood, the nask was going to get eaten by something else long before it even made it to the hona. Despite that fact, I heard myself grating, “Fine.”

I hoped Danny wasn’t aware of just how much of a pushover I was when it came to him.

Danny watched as I scooped up the nask and turned its fat little body so it was pointing toward the forest off the side of the path. It would have a better chance of hiding on the forest floor. The moment I set its stubby feet back down, it carried on rocking back and forth in its jerky little walk without missing a beat.

Danny beamed at me when I straightened up, stepping closer to wrap his arms around my middle. “Thank you.”

I grunted, strangely embarrassed by how proud I felt that I had made Danny happy by doing nothing more than picking up a fat little creature. I

would certainly never admit that I hoped the stupid little nask found a meal and its mate without being eaten.

“Can we keep moving now?” I asked instead, stroking a hand down the back of Danny’s head. I scratched it affectionately.

“Yeah. Our good deed for the day is done.” Danny kept his arm around my waist as we started walking, glancing back at the nask. “Don’t get eaten, little guy.”

“We’re supposed to do a good deed every day?” I muttered.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

We were almost at the hot springs when we finally came across others.

It was a family of usho, so they were nothing for us to worry about. Usho were a boring, logic-driven species, which meant they were good business owners. Most tended to reside in the cities because of this, which meant this family had most likely taken a trip to the springs for their *healing properties*. Their kind kept to themselves and had no natural predators, because they apparently tasted awful.

Unfortunately, this made them arrogant.

The three parents of the group gave us ugly looks, glaring at me with wary disdain but eyeing Danny with outright, disgusted hostility. I bristled, trying to decide how angry Danny would be if I, at the very least, terrified them enough to make them flee.

“What is that thing?” one of the younglings asked. Their sibling giggled as they both stared at Danny with the open, unabashed curiosity that only the young got away with.

“It’s so weird.” The shorter of the pair nudged the other. “Look at the hairs coming out the top of its head. It looks like a phorim.”

Phorims were a type of reed that grew along the edges of marshes. They were tall and slender; pale with tufts of fluffy dark fibres that sprouted from their tops. Danny did *not* look like a phorim.

When I glanced at him and saw that his throat was splotchy, rage flared. He couldn’t have known what they had said, but he could obviously tell that they were talking about him. I let out a low, ominous sound that made even Danny break out in goosebumps. The two younglings squealed with terror and scrambled ahead to catch up to their parents.

“They were talking about me, weren’t they?” Danny asked. “Assholes.”

“They’re adolescents,” I told him. I didn’t want him to think everything in this world was going to be openly hostile to him, although I wasn’t sure how welcoming creatures would be. But most intelligent beings possessed enough common decency to at least withhold any comments they might have had about a human. Those two were young, ignorant and poor-mannered. Otherwise I would have already threatened to rip out their

throats for speaking that way about Danny. I was close to threatening the parents if they didn't shut their runts up, as it was.

"Children can still be assholes."

I wheezed. "Yes. Edin was barely an adult when I met him, and he was *definitely* an asshole. He still is."

Danny snorted a laugh, which made one of the usho on the path ahead glance back at us over their shoulder. Their thick, tendril-like ropes of hair shifted over their sloping shoulders, wide mouth turning down into a disapproving frown.

"He is not!" Danny bumped his shoulder into my arm. "He just doesn't take your shit."

"I don't give him *shit*."

Danny laughed again. "You know what I mean. He teases you and you get all grumpy about it."

My fingers twitched, and I resisted the urge to tap them one-by-one against my thumb. "That is untrue." I despised how sulky my voice came out.

Danny snuffled with laughter, and even though my fearsome reputation would be compromised if one of the usho saw, I let him sway closer and kiss my jaw within the depths of my hood.

"He should respect me," I couldn't help but blurt out. "I am his elder." I had practically *raised* him through his early adulthood. Insolent brat.

"Wyn, you're *everyone's* elder."

I huffed at that and fell silent.

The Zoli Basin was just that: a great basin in the land that began with a gentle, almost imperceptible slope before sharpening into a sudden drop just beyond a craggy ridge. Some believed it was a footprint from a race of ancient, god-like and monstrously huge giants who had walked this world before the rest of us. I didn't. I knew the mabs were supposed to be giant, but nothing could have been *that* giant.

The ground was dry and sandier here, a lighter, muddy red-grey compared with the dark earth and black-red grass that grew in lusher areas. When I led Danny to the ridge and stopped, he gave a sweet little gasp.

"Wow."

I felt a ridiculous flutter of pride at his reaction. The basin *was* fairly unique, with its glowing blue-purple pools ringed in copper and red. Giant crystals jutted around each of the pools' edges, some so large the water was barely visible. And towering over them all were the layth vines, many of them half-crystallised, but some still moving gently in the heat rising from the pools. They were laden with electric pink flowers, some fresh and dripping with moisture, others already encased in crystal and shimmering with condensation.

I squeezed Danny's hand, mouth twitching as I looked over at his awed expression. "We can stop here, if you want to bathe."

He grinned over at me, eyes bright. "Seriously?"

I nodded and tugged him forward. The group of usho were already making their way down the stone path that cut through the ridge and descended into the basin, toward the hot pools. When they realised we would be following them, I saw two of the three adults start whispering frantically to each other.

The sun was going down, the twin moons already faintly visible on the horizon. We had been walking all day, and I was sure Danny was tired, but he hadn't complained at all. He could bathe here, and then I would find us somewhere for him to sleep. There were tiny stone lodges nearby for those who visited the pools to stay in. Aside from the usho, I could see that the hot springs were empty, so we should be able to rest there undisturbed.

"Is this like… a sacred place?" Danny asked in a hushed voice as we descended the stone steps, eyes wide as he took in the towering layth vines overhead.

I grunted noncommittally. It was to most, but not to me, so I didn't really care.

"Wow, it's warm," Danny commented as we reached the bottom of the steps. The usho were heading toward the pools to our left, so I tugged Danny in the opposite direction.

He stumbled, too busy gazing up at the layth vines that loomed so tall over us, sagging with heavy pink flowers the size of our heads. Their sweet scent permeated the humid air.

"They look kinda like giant sweet peas," Danny said. "My momma grew sweet pea on the tiny little balcony we had back in the city."

I didn't know enough about plants in the human world to know if that was true, so instead I squeezed his hand and said, "She would have liked

these then, yes?”

“Yeah.” He grinned over at me. “They’re pretty. But how come some parts of them look like they’re made of crystal?”

“They grow from the pools, so the minerals build up and form the crystals, which slowly encase the plants,” I told him. “It’s why they get so massive. They have to keep growing offshoots.”

“I’ve never seen plants this big,” Danny said, eyes bright with awe as he reached out and tentatively brushed his fingers over a crystallised flower. “I’ve never even seen *trees* this big.”

“You have trees far bigger than this in your country,” I told him.

He nodded. “Yeah, the giant redwoods. But I haven’t seen them.” He nudged me with his elbow, shooting me a smile. “Maybe you can take me when we get back.”

“I’ll take you,” I promised, squeezing his hand. If this worked, we would have all the time in the world to visit every inch of his country, outside of the vile cities. The thought caused my stomach to tighten with uneasy hope and longing. *Please let this work.*

“So you can bathe in these?” Danny asked as I pulled him to a secluded pool, the crystal and vines hiding us from view. “It’s not like, taboo or anything?”

“You can bathe in them. That’s what creatures come here to do.”

“But, so…” Danny peered over my shoulder nervously, nibbling his bottom lip. “Do we have to get naked? What about those other guys?”

My mouth twitched. “*You* do. I’m not getting in. And they can’t see, Danny. I promise.”

“Wait, what?” Danny frowned up at me. It was adorable. “I don’t want to get in if you’re not!”

“Yes, you do.” I grasped Danny’s shoulders and turned him, leading him toward the edge of the pool. Steam rose gently from its surface in curling tendrils, the air perfumed by the layth flowers and the water glowing softly from the crystals that sprouted from its edges.

“I mean yeah, okay, it looks *amazing*, so of course I do.” Danny sounded disgruntled. “But I want you to get in with me.”

There was no fucking way I was getting naked with a family of entitled, judgemental usho nearby, even if they couldn’t see us. “I’m sorry, sweet.” I eased his backpack and gun from his back. “I’ll sit by the edge.”

He huffed with displeasure but knew there was no point arguing with me. I set his bag and weapons on the ground while he yanked off his boots and socks. Then he fiddled with the hem of his shirt, looking self-conscious, which made me want to pull him into my arms tight.

His throat bobbed. “Are you sure they can’t see?”

I knew he still got self-conscious about the brand on his chest, especially after the incident with Edin’s brutish human companion.

“I promise,” I told him. “And if they try to look, I’ll rip their eyes out.”

He choked out a laugh, finally pulling his shirt off and setting it on the ground. I got momentarily distracted by the sight of all those smooth, golden muscles on display. Danny was no longer quite as chiselled as he’d been when we met—when he’d been on the military’s rigorous exercise regime—but he still had a beautiful body, with long limbs, firm muscles and a tight stomach.

He was perfect.

After pulling off his pants, he hesitated again, fingertips tucked under the band of his underwear.

“I promise they can’t see, Danny. They’re all the way on the other side.”

He exhaled a hard breath and yanked his underwear down, which made my mouth twitch even as my fingers flexed at the sight of him naked. I wanted to touch him. But then I always wanted to touch him, so it was nothing new.

Danny got into the pool quickly, letting out a long, relaxed breath as the water enveloped him. “Damn, that’s nice.”

I took off my satchel and sat cross-legged beside the pool, moving Danny’s clothes back a bit to make sure they didn’t get wet. “Good.”

He submerged himself completely in the water, his dark hair plastered to his head when he re-emerged. He slicked it back and waded through the water, folding his arms over the edge of the pool and resting his chin there as he gazed up at me.

“You know, I was convinced you were goin’ to kill me on our first day together out in the Wastes.”

I huffed. “I know.”

He watched me a moment longer, then grinned. “Do you think you’d kill me if I dragged you into this pool fully clothed?”

“Yes,” I answered immediately, and Danny burst out laughing as he pushed away from the edge and waded a few steps back.

“I won’t. I promise,” he told me, but his wide grin made me not trust him in the slightest. I dissipated, resolidifying several feet back from the pool edge, and ignored Danny’s low snicker.

I could hear one of the usho faintly complaining to their companions about how “loud” we were being, just because Danny had laughed. I gritted my teeth as cold anger swept through me.

“Feel free to leave if we’re disturbing you,” I barked in their language, throwing my voice so it echoed ominously through the pools.

As the usho fell silent, Danny shot me a cautious, questioning look. I shook my head and dissipated, resolidifying cross-legged at the edge of the pool as he waded forward.

“Do *not* drag me in,” I grated in a threatening voice as I leaned down.

Danny grinned as he lifted himself out of the water just enough to reach my mouth. “I won’t,” he said a second before his lips found mine within the depths of my hood.

“What did you just say to them?” he asked when we parted, lowering himself back into the water with surprising grace—for him.

“I told them to fuck off,” I said, because I knew it would make Danny—

“Wyn!” He shoved at my knee. “That’s so rude. They have just as much right to be here.”

“They were bitching,” I drawled, leaning back on a hand as my eyes tracked droplets of water sliding down Danny’s golden skin.

“Oh.” His shoulders hunched self-consciously, and he watched his fingers as they dragged through the water. “About me?”

“No, about me,” I lied, because I loathed the sight of him feeling unsure of himself. “My presence is ruining the peaceful atmosphere, apparently.”

Danny looked up, my words ironically making him flush with righteous anger on my behalf. “That’s bullshit.”

I huffed, leaning forward again and beckoning Danny closer. “I don’t care.” I cupped his chin and kissed him the moment he was in reach.

Danny made a soft noise against my mouth. “C’mon, get in the water with me,” he pleaded when our lips parted. “Please?”

I hesitated, glancing back over my shoulder in the direction of the usho. I could hear them hissing to each other more quietly now, but it sounded like they were getting out of the pool to leave.

“Let’s just come back tomorrow,” one of the parents muttered.

“Come on, children,” another said. “Almost bed time.”

The two younglings protested, splashing in the water, making my lip curl with disdain.

"Will they be staying at the lodges?" the third parent asked. "What *is* that thing with the telyth? Is it going to make that barking noise all night?"

My jaw clenched hard.

"I'll be back in one moment," I told Danny, dissipating before he could answer.

When I resolidified at the edge of the usho's pool, the adults choked and gargled with shock while the younglings screamed. I waited patiently for them to fall silent, ignoring the two adolescents to stare at the three parents, knowing they could feel my cold gaze. As one, they shivered.

"You're making a lot of noise." My voice was ominously soft. "With all this screaming."

One of the adults sucked in a breath. "We're—we're leaving."

"Good. Because I can hear you talking about my partner." I took a casual step forward, wanting to smirk when the three adults jerked back. "So it would probably be best for you to leave. Yes?"

"Y-yes." One of the adults inched their way to the side, toward the younglings, as if I was going to hurt their annoying little children.

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. "Hurry up," I snapped instead, before returning to Danny.

"Um, everything okay?" he asked as I resolidified in my spot beside the pool.

"Fine."

He waded over to stand in front of me again, wet hands palming my knees. "So are you gonna get in?" He grinned up at me. "C'mon, they can't see anyway. And the water's real nice."

"They're leaving," I told him, and his grin turned wicked.

"Even better. We can make out if you get in here with me." He stilled, brows pinching with worry. "Actually, we probably shouldn't if this is, like, sacred ground."

That made the contrarian in me puff up in protest, so I dissipated to spy on the usho family until they left, then returned to Danny. When I resolidified, I began pulling my clothes off.

Danny whistled suggestively. "Slow down, baby."

I rolled my eyes. "You're ridiculous," I told him as I yanked off my boots and dropped them on the ground beside my coat and dagger. After

unbuttoning and tugging off my shirt, I pulled down my pants and slipped into the hot water with Danny.

He immediately waded over and plastered himself to my front. “See?” He wrapped wet arms around my neck, playing with my hair. “Isn’t this nice?”

This was. The water, I couldn’t care less about.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

As the sky turned black, the crystallised flowers of the layth vines began to give off their subtle pink glow, competing with the blues and purples of the jutting crystals that emerged from the water.

We were still in the hot pool, and it was quiet and unmoving all around us except for the gentle swaying of the layth vines from the rising heat. I leaned my head back against the edge of the pool, holding Danny's back to my front as we sat in the shallower end.

His skin was so warm and smooth and slippery, I couldn't help but lazily run my palms over every inch of him I could reach. Not that Danny seemed to mind in the slightest. He rested his head against my shoulder, skimming his fingertips over the surface of the water.

I would never admit it out loud, because he would gloat, but this was more than nice. This was… wonderful. There had never been—and never would be—another being in the universe who I could be this relaxed and content around. Not even Edin, who I trusted with my life.

Danny made me feel peaceful.

I tugged him closer to me and lifted my head from the stone so I could lean down and kiss his shoulder. I breathed in the scent of his skin, nuzzling the bend of his neck. Danny sighed and turned his head on my shoulder to rub his nose against my jaw.

He lifted his hands out of the water and held them up in front of us. "I'm so pruny," he said. "Does your skin go like that?"

He grabbed one of my hands and lifted it, threading his fingers through my blackened ones. He grunted. "Too dark to tell."

I huffed in amusement. "Will you love me less if my skin doesn't go pruny like yours?" I teased.

"Obviously," he deadpanned, then yelped when I spun him in my arms with a splash.

His legs tangled with mine beneath the water, the length of his body pressing tight to my front. I palmed his ass as a rush of pleasure surged through me.

Danny kissed me on the mouth, then the chin, then the jaw. "I suppose we should get out now, huh?" He moved back out of my arms.

“Wait.” I tugged him back. “I want to do something first.”

His brows twitched. “What?”

I couldn’t stop the evil grin spreading my lips, showing all of my sharp teeth, as I pulled Danny close. Dipping my head, I kissed his neck softly, just beneath his earlobe.

Then, squeezing his ass tight, I murmured, “I want to eat this beautiful ass.”

Danny choked on a breath, his throat going splotchy. “Jesus, Wyn.”

I wheezed a chuckle. “What?” I kissed his throat again. “Will you let me, Danny?”

“Will I *let* you eat my—?” Danny choked out a laugh, moving back to look at me. His cheeks were bright red. “Wyn, you know I’d always—We’re in public. Like. Literally *out in the open*.”

“So?” I tugged him closer again. “We’re alone.”

Danny gazed at me, chewing nervously on his lip. I could tell he was tempted.

I could *feel* that he was tempted, because it was pressing up against my thigh.

“That family is gone, right?” he peered over his shoulder. “There’s no one else here?”

“They’re long gone.” I smoothed my hands over his delightfully pert ass beneath the water. “No one else is here. No one else will come here now—trust me. Besides,”—I leaned in to nuzzle his cheek—“it’s dark. We’re hidden. The layth vines will obstruct anyone’s view.”

“Goddamnit, Wyn.” Danny gripped my sides and shifted his hips closer, giving a little gasp when his hard cock slid over my wet skin beneath the water. “Now all I can think about is your tongue in my ass.”

I wheezed a throaty laugh. “Best let me do it then, sweet. So you’re not distracted for the rest of the night.”

As far as justifications went, it was flimsy at best, but I didn’t care. I wanted to make Danny writhe with pleasure. Now.

I dipped my head to kiss his neck, and Danny let out a low groan, an arm coming around my shoulder to tangle his fingers in my wet hair. His hand moved absently as he tilted his head to make room for me, fingers playing with the base of my horn.

My body gave an almost imperceptible shudder at the feel. I had never outright told Danny how sensitive I was there, but I thought he suspected. It

meant that while his touch there felt wonderful, it had also been a somewhat unpleasant process when my left horn was regrowing after the military blew half my skull away.

I was still irritated about that.

But I wasn't going to think about it now. Not when I had a wet, naked Danny in my arms, his stiff cock rubbing against my thigh and his long fingers teasing the base of my horn.

I sucked lightly on his neck before licking his soft earlobe. Danny shivered, then sucked in a sharp breath when I dipped my tongue briefly into his ear.

I turned us both until Danny's back was against the edge of pool. Patting the smooth stone, I murmured in his ear, "Sit up here, Danny."

He shivered again and reluctantly pulled away, nervous eyes darting around us. The hot pools were still and silent except for the plinking drip of condensation falling from the layth vines back into the water.

Danny let out a hard exhale. "Fucking hell, Wyn," he muttered, glancing around again furtively even as he hoisted himself out of the water to sit at the edge of the pool. "Am I *seriously* letting you give me a rim job out in the open where anyone could see us—in these, like, sacred pools?"

"They're not sacred," I said. Not to me, anyway.

I smoothed my palms up his thighs to spread his knees and moved into the space between them. Danny's hard cock bobbed between us, making my mouth water, but he shivered. "It's cold out of the water."

"Mm." I made a sympathetic sound and leaned forward to kiss his chest, in the centre of the scarred brand there. Danny cupped my face and tilted my head up, leaning down to kiss me. His lips parted, tongue slicking against mine, and I let out a low sound against his mouth. My cock slid free and jerked in the water.

By the time the kiss ended, I was achingly hard, and Danny's prick was jerking between us, the head flushed and a drop of clear fluid beading at the slit.

I raked my sharp teeth over my lower lip as I stared at it. I heard Danny curse weakly, and another bead pulsed from the tip.

I managed to hold back my hungry snarl at the sight. "Lie back, sweet."

Danny shivered again—this time, not from the cold—and lay back against the smooth stone, which was thankfully warm. Still palming his firm thighs, I leaned down to drop a single kiss on his hip bone.

Danny's hips jerked when I enveloped the head of his cock in a wet, open-mouthed kiss, but I only remained there long enough to lick up the hint of pre-cum that had spilled from the tip before I was kissing down his length and tonguing his balls, which made him shudder and let his knees fall open wider.

I slid my hands around to the backs of his knees, pushing them up toward his shoulders. Danny sucked in a shuddery breath, his toes flexing with anticipation—the smallest one conspicuously absent on his left foot.

"Wyn," he rasped in a shaky voice.

Danny loved when I did this. *Loved* it. I'd even been able to make him come once or twice with my tongue alone, his cock untouched and pulsing on his belly, or hanging like a steel bar between his legs if I had him on his hands and knees.

I let out a low moan as I swept my tongue over his rim in a soft lick. Danny made a sweetly undignified noise from his throat, his head falling back against the stone even as a hand shot down to thread through my hair. When his fingers curled around the sensitive base of my horn, I snarled and swirled my tongue.

"Oh, fuck," Danny panted, then made another choked sound as I started licking in earnest. "God, that feels good."

I rumbled out my approval when I felt him twitch beneath my tongue. I licked him again and again, moaning at the clean, familiar taste of him, swirling my tongue and tracing his rim with the very tip until his hips bucked helplessly.

Danny let out a low whine, but it turned into a guttural groan when I sank my tongue inside him. "Wyn," he rasped.

I didn't answer him, too busy thrusting my tongue even deeper and making him gasp, but I ran a soothing hand down his inner thigh before stroking my thumb over his tight balls.

Danny gasped again, shuddering with pleasure. I licked deep inside him one last time before pulling back to trail my hand lower until I could slide the pad of my thumb back and forth over his wet, twitching hole.

He was panting, legs tense and trembling as he kept his knees up by his shoulders. It was probably wrong or sick that the sight of my inhuman, blackened fingers against his smooth, golden skin was so arousing. I watched intently as I circled his wet, twitching hole with one fingertip, glancing up to gauge Danny's reaction.

His chest heaved, and as I slowly sank my finger inside, he let out a choked sound as his cock flexed off his belly, straining for friction that wasn't there. I grinned and leaned forward to tongue his balls, studiously ignoring his twitching cock.

"Fuck, Wyn." Danny's breath hitched as I sank my finger deep again. He raised his head to look down at me, brows pinched with anguished arousal. "You have to—Please—"

"What?" I murmured, scraping my sharp teeth very gently over the sensitive stretch of skin beneath his tight sac.

Danny's breath shuddered out of him. "I need you."

I bared my teeth in a pleasured snarl. Danny scrambled back to give me room between his legs as I heaved myself out of the water. He was panting, hands already reaching for my shoulders to tug me down, but I didn't let him.

The water had washed away the slick on my cock, so I reached down to slide my fingers over my slit as I stared down at Danny, kneeling over him. I knew my gaze was sometimes too intense, but when he was like this—splayed and trembling and desperate—I became greedy to drink in the sight of it.

Suppressing a shudder of pleasure, I slid my fingers inside, wanting to snarl when Danny's eyes hooded as he watched. He palmed my thighs, squeezing, his cock flexing against his stomach.

When he licked his lips, a fresh flood of wetness coated my fingers.

"Are you going to make yourself come for me?" he asked, voice husky and thick, eyes fixed on where my fingers disappeared inside my body. He loved watching me do that sometimes.

My cock jerked against my wrist at the words, channel pulsing as I slid my fingers free. I huffed. "Not today," I told him as I slicked up my cock, then reached down between his legs to stroke his hole. It was already softer and more pliant thanks to my tongue, but I wanted to stretch him to make sure I didn't hurt him.

Danny let out a sharp breath as I sank two slick fingers inside, his dick twitching on his belly. He propped himself up on one elbow and reached forward to stroke my cock, making me shudder, my head briefly tipping back before I looked back down at him and curved my fingers inside him.

"*Nnngh*." Danny let out the low sound through gritted teeth, hips jerking helplessly as I teased that sensitive spot inside him. I knew just how much

pressure to exert to make Danny writhe and beg, his beautiful body straining to come.

I didn't have time for that now. I was already too hard, too fucking eager to get inside him, so I carefully slid a third finger inside and concentrated on getting him ready for my cock.

Danny shuddered, fingers tightening on me before they let go of my shaft to trail lower. When he sank two inside me, I snarled and dug claw-like fingertips into his firm thigh with my free hand. My hips jerked forward, and I decided Danny was prepared enough.

Sliding my fingers free, I grabbed his left thigh and hoisted his knee up over the crook of my elbow. Danny grunted as I spread him open, then groaned when I leaned forward and claimed his mouth.

The tip of my cock brushed his slick, pliant hole and it twitched against the sensitive head. I snarled into Danny's mouth and flexed my hips. He ended the kiss to breathe out, bearing down, and after a moment of resistance I broke through, my cock sinking inside.

Danny shuddered hard, fingers clawing my scarred back, as his body seemed to suck me in. It was just as exquisite as it had been that first time. Every time with him was. The root of my cock throbbed inside me, pleasure spreading through my body. The moment my hips met his ass, I made myself to go still.

Hard, frantic need clawed at me, but I forced myself to be gentle as I brushed my lips against Danny's. "Are you alright?" I asked him, insides twisting from the feel of him clenching around me. His rim gripped the base of my cock so tight it made my knees weak.

"Yeah." Danny's voice was husky with need, his hands sliding down my back to grab my ass hard. "Start moving, *telyth*."

I huffed and resisted the urge to bare my teeth at him in a rabid grin, instead kissing him again as I pulled my hips back. We both shuddered when I sank back inside, and I moaned helplessly as Danny sucked on my tongue. I couldn't have stopped the heavy, pounding rhythm my hips took up even if I'd wanted to.

"Mmmfuck." Danny groaned against my mouth, fingers digging into me harder even as the leg still draped over my elbow trembled. He was vocal during sex. And loud. If anyone *was* approaching the pools, they'd be sure to hear us. Hopefully it would scare them off, because I couldn't be responsible for my murderous actions if someone interrupted this.

You feel so good, I wanted to tell him, but I still worried sometimes that the inhuman sound of my voice would put him off during sex—would remind him of just how different I was, or take him out of the moment. As much as Danny might protest, I knew my voice instilled instinctive disgust in humans. Pure fear. I had no idea why Danny seemed to like it.

But he was my strange, sweet human, so I tried not to think on it too much and tempt the fates to take him away from me.

I could already tell that neither of us would last long this time. Danny's cock was achingly stiff and leaking between us. I pressed closer so that it rubbed against my stomach, stimulating his shaft and his sac, which was already hard and pulled up tight.

My lips curved into a smile against his mouth when Danny choked on a breath. "Fuck." His voice was tight between panting breaths. "Wyn, I'm gonna come."

I delivered a particularly brutal thrust and dipped my head to graze his neck with my teeth. "Good."

I knew I was teasing his prostate mercilessly, because Danny's voice stuttered. "F-f-fuck—I mean—really s-s-soon—"

I huffed, trailing my tongue down the corded length of his tense neck. "Me too."

"Oh fuck." Danny's voice became desperate. Frantic. His fingers gripped me tighter, unwilling to let go. "Wyn—"

His teeth clamped down on my shoulder as he let out a strained, muffled shout. Between us, I could feel his cock spurting long ropes of cum, and I snarled when his ass spasmed around me. I pounded hard and deep, making his whole body jerk as he whimpered with the last of his orgasm. As I snarled into his neck, my cock began to twitch inside him with my release. Heat burst through every inch of me, and I could feel how slick I was as I pressed as tight against Danny's ass as I could. The sensation and friction made me shudder with another, smaller orgasm as I panted into Danny's neck. My hips moved of their own volition as we both recovered, sliding my cock back and forth through the slipperiness it had created inside Danny. The sensation made me moan into Danny's neck as he caught his breath.

I nuzzled my way along his jaw to his mouth, and our kiss was slow and sweet, tongues sliding together in a soft caress now that we were both sated. I didn't want to leave the warmth of Danny's body, but I knew he would

start to get uncomfortable, so I carefully slid free, gritting my teeth to try and stave off the stark pleasure that rushed up my cock from the friction.

“Now I need to get back in the pool to clean up.” Danny’s voice was husky and loose, all the tension gone from his body as he ran his hands up and down my scarred back in a lazy caress.

I kissed his cheek before sitting back and tangling my fingers with his to help pull him up. I swung myself easily back into the water and helped Danny slide in, my mouth twitching. His legs were always a little unsteady after I fucked him like that.

“I feel bad. We’re getting spunk in the pool.” Danny’s voice was worried and sheepish.

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. Who gave a fuck? “Don’t feel bad. Just consider it an offering to the gods.”

Danny choked on a breath. “What?” He gave my shoulder a weak smack. “You said these pools weren’t sacred!” He poked me in the stomach. “We just fucked in a religious place? You had your *tongue up my ass on sacred ground?*”

I huffed and pulled him closer to drop a kiss in his hair. “My sweet, it was a joke.”

I would just have to make sure he didn’t see the shrine when we left.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The land grew hilly as we approached the Caen an Sin. Some believed it was the earth reacting to the thunderous anger of the mabs, crying out and trying to escape into the sky.

When we approached the top of a high hill and the vast fortress of the Caen an Sin came into view, Danny went tense beside me. I knew what he was feeling, because even I could feel it, to a lesser degree. The oppressive weight in the air. The knowledge that something greater was nearby. Something we shouldn't linger near for too long.

If I could feel it, I could only imagine how the mabs' presence would affect a more fragile species like humans.

I squeezed Danny's hand. "We shouldn't have to stay too long, Danny," I told him, then glanced over to see how pale he looked, his features drawn. My guts tightened.

"We don't have to do this," I said, trying to gentle my voice. "We can just go back. We can leave."

"No." Danny's voice was determined despite how uneasy he felt. "I want to do this. We've come all this way."

I raised our linked hands into my hood, pressing my lips to the back of his. "Brave human."

He snorted. "Or just stubborn. And stupid."

"You're neither." I kissed his knuckles again before letting our hands drop. "If you're sure you want to do this…"

"Yes." Danny let out a hard breath and started walking, tugging on my hand. "I'm going to make sure you're stuck with me for the next four thousand years."

I ducked my head, smiling as we descended the hill. The fortress was so massive that the end of it wasn't even visible, swallowed up by thick fog that hung over the sea. It was impossible to say how huge it was—how far back it extended—but if it housed the two mabs, it had to be unfathomably large.

At the bottom of the hill, there was a broken stone path that looked worn with time. As we got closer, I could see the faint remnants of symbols carved into each thick stone, barely visible now.

The Caen an Sin looked even more monumental from ground level. On either side of it, the Yawning Sea crashed against the cliffside, as though it had devoured all of the land except for the narrow stretch that connected what would otherwise be an island to the mainland.

The fortress itself was made from stone so black it sucked in all the light around it. Even though it was the mild season, the sky was still a pale pink-grey here, and the waters were tumultuous. When the mabs were fighting and the storms came, the sky was almost as dark as constant night, and the roar of the sea was unbearably loud beneath the thunderous crashes of the mabs trying to kill each other.

Danny let out a quiet, trembling breath. “It’s big.”

He was so nervous, his hand damp with sweat within mine. My chest squeezed, and I drew us to a stop so I could turn Danny to face me.

“We don’t have to go in,” I told him, cupping his cheek and stroking my thumb over its high point. “I’ll still take you to a city. I’ll still show you whatever you want, I promise.”

Danny’s mouth curved into a tiny smile as he covered my hand with his. “We’re going in. I told you, Wyn.”

“I know, but—”

“I promise I’d tell you if I was having doubts. I promise, okay?” Danny turned his head to kiss my palm. “I want to be with you for as long as I can. I want to do this.”

I swallowed and gave a tiny nod. I trusted Danny, and I believed him. I always believed him. But humans were fickle and sometimes reckless, especially when it came to their emotions. They felt things intensely, perhaps because of how short their lifespans were, but those feelings could change so rapidly.

I didn’t think I’d be able to stand it if Danny changed his mind after doing this. If he resented me for it. If he started trying to find ways to end his life, unable to stand the thought of living with me—or just living—for so long.

This was an emotion I had little experience with. Fear. I feared little, mainly because for most of my life, I’d had very little to lose. Edin had been my closest companion for a long, long time, but he would have been fine without me, and he was strong enough that I didn’t worry for his safety.

But now that I had Danny… now, it felt like I had *everything* to lose. And it made me afraid.

I pulled our linked hands away from his cheek to my mouth, so I could drop a reverent kiss on Danny's knuckles. I breathed in his scent for a moment, before lowering our hands and tugging to get us walking again.

The sea was so loud as it crashed angrily against the cliffs, making it impossible to speak and hear one another. As we reached the narrow path, the earthen bridge that led to the fortress, I could feel the spray of the water misting us. The fortress blocked out the sky.

I had told Danny what to expect here, to the best of my knowledge. I'd warned him of the mabs and how they would witness our joining. I'd tried to prepare him for the desolate nature of this part of the world. But it couldn't have prepared either of us for what the Caen an Sin actually looked like. What it *felt* like.

It felt… wrong.

When we reached the doors, they towered over us, stretching impossibly high above our heads. The stone was black as the night sky, but its faint, reddish sheen from the earth made the intricate carvings stand out in relief, as though the shapes were moving, constantly writhing.

Creatures from all over had been carved into the stone with painstaking detail. The vast beasts of the waters. The ancient tribes of the old races, Edin's extinct people depicted in the overflowing forests to the west, and the word-hoarding aytorin scholars in the ruined city to the south. The horror of the rycke's true form in all its morbid glory, wings stretched wide and looming over the land.

I grunted as I pushed on one of the doors, its substantial weight testing even my strength. As it inched open, a blast of stagnant, dust-filled air rushed out. No one had visited for a long time, then. Truthfully, hardly anyone came here. Of those couples whose lifespans differed so greatly, it seemed that not many were willing to sacrifice half of their lives for their lover.

Once the door was open enough for us to step through, I ushered Danny inside. The room we stepped into was cavernous. So large that the glow from the braziers, burning with white fire, couldn't reach the ceiling or the corners. Darkness shrouded them, making it feel as though we'd stepped into the night. Or the bottom of an endless pit.

"It's… so big," Danny whispered, voice uneasy. He gripped my hand tighter.

“It wasn’t built for beings our size,” I told him, keeping my voice low, though I wasn’t sure why. I led Danny into the depths of the room, between the two sparse rows of enormous braziers that lit our way. The floors gleamed with more intricate carvings, the firelight making the creatures depicted seem like they were watching us, or following us.

It was quiet. Oppressively so. But neither of us spoke. I could sense the nerves swirling in Danny, but I didn’t know what would comfort him in this moment. This place was not made for us—especially not for him—so there was little I could say or do to put him at ease. This feeling of *too much,* of wanting to flee, was not going to fade.

It took us a long time to cross the vast hall. I didn’t have the sense of eyes watching us, but I could tell in my marrow that the mabs were aware of our presence. That they were waiting for us already. It was all they did. Wait and watch, or fight.

We reached another set of doors, just as large as the first. After I heaved one open, we stepped into a room much like the first hall, but far smaller and lit only by a single, enormous brazier hanging from the ceiling. A third set of doors were visible in front of us, and light was seeping from beneath them. As we got closer, the flickering firelight licked over the depictions carved into the door, different to all the others.

These doors showed us the mabs. Or at least an ancient artist’s rendition of them. Ara and Hag. Night and day. Light and dark. The two most basic, fundamental opposites in nature, locked in a constant battle, both repulsed by one another and drawn inexplicably together.

A twinge of apprehension hit me at the thought of being in their presence. Of seeing them. They were almost as old as these lands. Far, far older than me. Than any other living creatures. They were *other*.

We stopped in front of the doors. Even though I knew it would most likely exasperate him, I turned to Danny one last time. “Are you sure?”

The presence of the mabs just beyond these doors pulsed in my head, like a deep drum or a dying heartbeat. Slow and too low to truly hear, but it reverberated through every inch of me. I didn’t like to think about how it was affecting Danny.

He was still pale, his hairline damp with sweat. “I’m sure.”

I didn’t comment on the way his voice shook, or how tightly his fingers were gripping mine. I just leaned my shoulder against one of the doors to shove it open without having to let go of Danny’s hand. My teeth clenched

as I strained under the door’s monumental weight. Slowly, it inched inward with a scrape of stone.

Light spilled through—not overly bright, but it seemed it after walking through the cavernous darkness of the halls. This room was equally as massive as the others, and as we stepped into the soft glow of it, I stiffened. It felt like all the air had been sucked out. Like my head had been pushed underwater, everything momentarily muffled.

I lifted my head and saw the mabs.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

They sat on a dais in the centre of the room, on two massive thrones that both faced a large stone basin of pale pink water. A stream, carved out of the floor, flowed between them, the gentle rush of water the only sound in the vast hall.

A skylight sat above the bowl, sending in shafts of weak light to compete with the flickering white fire from the braziers on either side of the dais. The walls in here were smooth, free of any of the carvings we had seen on every other surface in this place. Even the mabs' thrones were plain and unadorned. Just hewn roughly from enormous chunks of stone.

The mabs watched us silently. They were unfathomably large. I knew that if I were to stand beside one of them, my body would be the same length as one of their fingers. Some revered them as gods, and I had always scoffed at that notion, but now that I was in their presence it felt… wrong *not* to desire to worship them. I locked my knees to resist the insidious urge to fall to them.

Neither of them had moved, and for a ridiculous moment I wondered if perhaps they weren't real—perhaps they were just gigantic, intricately carved, lifelike stone statues inlaid with precious metals and bone adornments.

But I knew that wasn't true. I could feel their lifeforces, like an ache in my teeth and a stabbing sensation in my guts. *Too much.*

Ara sat upright in his throne, long arms draped along the armrests and fingers curled around the carved ends. His skin was pure black, darker than the night sky, which made the blue-gold bands on his biceps and above his knees gleam even more brightly in the firelight. His only piece of armour was a short, sleeveless tunic made of stark white leather. I had no idea what kind of creature that could have been made from.

Perhaps from the creature whose skull covered his face. It was also pure white, with enormous antlers that jutted far up into the air, so big and heavy that it was a shock he could keep his head upright. Actually, I couldn't even tell if that *was* the skull of another creature, or if it was his actual face. I couldn't bring myself to look directly at him for long enough. Doing so made my insides spasm with foreboding.

Separated by the stream that filled the basin with its powerful waters, Hag sat in the other throne. But he was slouched, knees spread wide and chin propped on his hand, elbow resting on an armrest. The white of his skin was even more anaemic than my own colouring, and most of it was on display because he wore just a short black leather kilt as armour.

Down his shins and the centre of his chest were strange markings that hurt my eyes to look at. I still couldn't tell if I was looking at his real face or a skull mask, but it reminded me of the wild boar remains I had once seen in the human world. Except this was pure black. Huge tusks jutted out to the sides, their points deadly sharp.

I wanted to duck my head, to avert my eyes, and the sensation made me grit my teeth. I despised feeling *lesser*, especially for no reason other than being in the presence of enormous beings. While many regarded them as gods, I didn't. They were just ancient—so ancient that they were different. That's all this sensation was. *Wrongness.* I knew it was similar to how most humans felt in my presence, except for Danny.

Neither of the mabs had moved. I looked over at Danny, and my insides lurched when I saw the tears streaming from his wide, haunted eyes.

"Danny." I turned to cup his face in my hands, thumbing away the wetness. I leaned in to kiss his damp cheek, guilt slithering through me. "I'm sorry. I was selfish. We will go—"

"No." Danny tore his eyes from the mabs and looked up at me. His blue eyes looked dull with shock, even as he shook his head. "No, I'm—I'm okay."

He frowned and reached up to roughly wipe his face. "I didn't even realise I was crying. They're just…" His eyes slid reluctantly over my shoulder to the mabs, like he desperately didn't want to look at them but couldn't help himself. His expression was a mixture of horror and awe. "They're… overwhelming," he whispered.

He sounded so achingly young in that moment that I pulled him into my arms. My skin crawled from having my back to the mabs, but Danny was more important. Even so, it felt painfully raw to have them watching us.

"We don't have to interact with them," I murmured, pressing my lips to Danny's temple. "They are just here to witness. You don't have to look at them."

Danny's hands slipped under my coat to grip my scarred back through my shirt, holding me tight. His breath shuddered out of him. "Okay," he

whispered, burying his face in my throat, which he often did for comfort.

When we parted, he looked calmer, but still pale and tense. I didn't want to take him closer to the mabs any more than I wanted to get closer myself, but we had to. I linked our fingers again and led him to the basin. The pale pink water gurgled softly, the stream that led between the two mabs somehow flowing up vertically into the bowl by unknown forces. The water supposedly came from a place far up in the sky, hence its colour. From a place made out of unearthly materials, which gave it its life-altering properties.

The mabs still hadn't moved, but I could feel their eyes tracking us. Watching intently, despite Hag's bored posture. It felt like they were… *assessing* us. Judging us.

I wondered what they did to the ones they deemed unworthy of their gift.

On the lip of the raised stone dais, on which the great basin sat, was a smaller, deeper bowl made from white petrified wood. It fit neatly in the cup of my palms when I picked it up. I was grateful that I was old enough to know all the stories of this place—that I knew what we must do for this to work.

I dipped the bowl into the water to fill it before setting it back down on the dais to reach into my coat for my dagger. "We each have to offer our lifeforce," I told Danny.

He nodded, throat bobbing as he swallowed. "Blood?" he clarified.

"Just a drop each." I pricked my fingertip with the blade and squeezed it into the bowl. My black blood hissed as it hit the water, turning the pink dark and murky.

I handed Danny the dagger. He did the same, and the crimson that dripped into the water hissed as well. Then, like a sheet of ice forming over its surface before our eyes, the water turned milky white.

Danny handed me back my dagger, eyeing the bowl hesitantly. "Is it supposed to do that?" he asked, and despite the heavy, oppressive air in the room, my mouth twitched.

"I believe so." I picked up the bowl, careful not to spill any of its contents. My throat ached with the urge to ask Danny, yet again, whether he was sure he wanted to do this. I stopped myself, but my fingers twitched against the smooth wood, agitation growing.

I couldn't stop myself. "Danny—"

“Wyn,” he interrupted immediately, stepping closer. Careful of the bowl in my hands, he leaned up to kiss my chin in the depths of my hood. “I’m sure. I promise.”

I exhaled a low breath and nodded once. “We drink this,” I told him.

Danny’s eyes slid to the bowl. “And… that’s it?”

His disbelieving tone brought some levity to the great room, despite the two giant beings still silently watching us.

“Did you think it would be something more dramatic?” I asked him, mouth twitching.

Danny gave a small smile and shrugged. “Honestly, I had no idea what to expect.”

I lifted the bowl. “We drink this, and if it works, it will tether us. Our lives.”

Danny gave me a soft smile. “I can’t wait.”

I pushed back my hood, skin crawling yet again from the gazes of the mabs on my face, and brought the bowl to my lips. The water tasted bitter, with a hint of metal from Danny’s human blood, and scorched earth from mine. It was slippery, slipperier than normal water, and as I lowered the bowl I licked my lips, feeling an oily film on them.

I started to pass the bowl to Danny, but indecision froze me in place.

Was this safe? For him to drink?

What if it killed him? Or at least harmed him? This water was different to that which flowed in streams and rivers. This came from somewhere else. I couldn’t let—

“Stop. Worrying.” Danny sounded exasperated and took the bowl from my hands. Before I could react, he lifted it and drank.

Pure terror gripped my insides, but Danny just made a face as he lowered the bowl. “That is weird.” He licked his lips and peered into the bowl. It was half-full now. “Do we drink all of it?”

I was still gripped in panic that he was about to drop to the ground in agony. But he didn’t, and his aura remained the same—strong and healthy, though pulsing faintly with unease from the mabs’ presence. After long seconds of him staring at me expectantly, I nodded.

He grimaced and lifted the bowl back up, taking another gulp. When he handed it back to me, I finished what was left and placed the bowl back down on the dais.

Danny jumped violently—and I barely suppressed my flinch—when the mabs moved as one, both of them just slightly shifting in their seats. The movement drew my reluctant gaze to them, and then I blinked in shock.

Jagged, angry lines of light—or energy—streaked between the two silent giants. A constant push-pull of glowing ribbons that moved between them, some black, some white, some a greyish mix of the two. They jumped up and down into the stream of pale pink water flowing between the two mabs, and they made no noise, but I could somehow feel the roaring rush of them in my ears. Inside my skull.

I looked back at Danny to see if he was alright, and my fingers twitched at the sight of similar ribbons stretching between us. But these were different—wider and softer and duller. Like someone had tried to glue us together, and we were stretching the strands of adhesive with our distance.

They came out of every part of me, and out of identical spots on Danny. Our fingertips. Our mouths. Our throats and chests. They stretched and rippled as Danny raised a hand to see if he could touch them. As we watched, they slowly got fainter, but I could still *feel* them, even though I couldn't feel them at all. I knew they were there with every part of me.

I felt no different, but at the same time, I *did*. Perhaps I was just being a sentimental fool, but it suddenly felt like my life, my existence, had more meaning. More purpose.

It was for him.

The sudden silence in the room pressed on my ears, even though it had been silent all along. Danny was staring at me, a fine tremble running through his body. Before I could move, he launched himself into my arms.

"Wyn." He buried his face in my throat. "I wish I… I wish I had more to give you. This doesn't feel fair."

"What?" I blinked in surprise. "Danny, if you don't think your life is of equal value to mine—"

"It's not, though." He pulled back to look up at me, and my chest clenched at the sight of his blue eyes, bright with unshed tears. "It's *not* equal. You just gave me *half your remaining life*—thousands of years—and what I gave you in return is… nothing. A blip in time."

"So?"

"So you just cut your life short because of *me*. You're going to die young because of *me*." Danny was crying now, and it gutted me. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have let you do this for me. I just…" He shook his head, mouth

trembling. “I didn’t want you to be alone after I’m gone. I didn’t want you to feel that pain. But I should have thought about it more. About what it meant.”

This sweet, ridiculous human. I got the sense that this whole experience had overwhelmed him, and he was full of jittery, adrenaline-fuelled nerves. Humans sometimes had these intense emotional releases, I was sure. The mabs’ presence didn’t help—their gazes were making my own head feel heavy.

“My sweet.” I cupped Danny’s face, trying to keep my voice as patient as possible. “I wanted this more than anything in the universe. To be with you always.” I leaned in and kissed him. “You haven’t taken anything from me. You’ve given me a gift.”

Danny’s breath hitched against my cheek, but he seemed to be calming. He let out a slow, trembling breath.

“I think the big dudes are making me feel strange,” he whispered, voice uneasy like he was scared of what would happen if they heard. They could probably hear everything.

“They will be.” I kissed his cheek and pulled back to take his hand. “You’ll feel better when we get away from here.”

“Do we have to do anything else?” Danny asked, staying huddled at my side, clutching my hand with both of his. His eyes darted to the mabs and away again just as fast.

“No.” I raised our joined hands to kiss the back of his. “Nothing else. It’s done.”

Danny fidgeted beside me. “Should we, um, thank them?” he whispered.

I could have sworn a faint huff of sound came from Hag.

I lifted my hood back over my head to cover my smile. “No, my sweet. We don’t need to thank them.”

“My momma would probably kill me if I didn’t,” Danny admitted. “We *have* come into their…”—he waved a vague hand—“giant fortress and drunk their weird water.”

He jumped violently when Hag suddenly moved, sitting up from his slouch to lean forward in his throne, elbows resting on the armrests. The tusked skull face loomed closer, impossibly big, and I heard Danny suck in a panicked breath.

“Shit, okay, let’s just go.” He started walking backward, toward the door, tugging on my hand. “Thanks for your hospitality,” he mumbled before we

slipped through the gap.

I hesitated for a moment, wondering how I was going to close the huge door behind us—there was no handle this low—but then it shut with a heavy scraping sound.

I didn't know if it had happened on its own or if one of the mabs had closed it, and I didn't particularly want to find out, so I tugged Danny's hand and started walking quickly back through the hall.

"Fuck," Danny breathed, stumbling to keep up. "I want to say this whole thing was wild, even though nothing really happened."

I huffed in amusement, ushering Danny through the next set of doors into the cavernous final room. *Nearly out.*

"My head kind of hurts." Danny gave a weak chuckle, looking over at me. "Does yours? It's like… pressure. Like before a storm."

I nodded. That was exactly how it felt. Like the pressure that came before the storms when the mabs fought. "Yes. It's them. The mabs. They're not… They are something else. Something older."

Danny made an agreeing sound. I could feel his eyes still on me. "Are you okay, Wyn?" he asked, voice concerned.

I raised our hands to kiss his knuckles. "I'm fine. Just want to get you away from here. It weighs heavily."

He said nothing else and kept up with my long strides. Weak, pinkish-grey light sliced through the darkness in front of us, drawing us like a beacon. The air smelled cleaner in here now, and it was colder despite the braziers still burning with their white fire.

I ushered Danny outside first, then stepped out after him, barely even noticing when the huge door slowly closed itself behind us.

We had done it. It had worked.

I let out a hard breath, resisting the urge to squeeze Danny's hand painfully tight in mine. To gather him in my arms and not let go for as long as he would let me.

I tilted my face up to the sky and smiled.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

We walked far from the Caen an Sin, until the oppressive energy of the mabs was just an unpleasant, but still fresh memory. Danny's aura remained healthy, but he was tired and shaky, so eventually we stopped to rest for a while. We had been travelling north, along the coast, so we sat on the edge of the grass facing the sea, a stony beach between us and the murky blue-purple waves.

"Man, I can't believe I freaking *cried* in front of those giant god dudes." Danny sounded adorably disgruntled as he picked at the fraying strap of his backpack.

My mouth twitched. "Their presence affected me too. But you're not from this world, Danny. So it was worse for you."

He grunted. "Still embarrassing," he mumbled.

I wheezed a short laugh, leaning over to knock my shoulder into his. "Then take comfort in the fact that you will never, ever have to see them again."

He grinned over at me. "That's true. That place was… ominous."

"Now you see why not many choose to live near here."

"Except you." He knocked his shoulder into mine again. "You *love* ominous."

I huffed at his teasing.

"So what now?" Danny asked, uncapping his canteen to have a sip of water.

I reached over to scratch the back of his head. "I promised you a city, didn't I?"

Danny stilled, then chuckled. "Actually, you very specifically did *not* promise. You *very specifically* pointed out the fact that you *hadn't* promised."

I grunted. "I won't take you if you get mouthy with me," I threatened, but it just made him burst out laughing.

"Yeah, okay." His tone made it very clear that he didn't believe me. Because of course it wasn't true. I didn't think I had it in me to deny him anything.

“The nearest city is several days’ walk from here, though,” I warned Danny. “And there aren’t many shelters between here and there for us to rest in, I’m afraid.”

“So we’ll be roughing it for a while?” He grinned over at me, then shuffled closer to lean his head on my shoulder. “I don’t mind.”

I wrapped my arm around him, pulling him even closer and reaching up to play with the soft hair at the nape of his neck.

We sat in contented silence for long moments, just watching the sea as it rolled lazily onto the beach and back out in calm waves. It was quieter now that we were away from the Caen an Sin. The sky was still dull, but pinker than it had been above the fortress, though it was quickly deepening in colour as dusk approached.

“Do you regret it?” I couldn’t help but ask after a while, my voice a low, hoarse murmur. I hated how exposed I felt by the question, but it escaped me unbidden. I needed to know, even though Danny’s aura was still light and happy—exceptionally happy.

I felt like an insecure, pathetic youngling.

“No,” Danny said simply, not even lifting his head from my shoulder as he watched the ocean. Somehow, that answer was better than if he’d gone on about how glad he was. How happy he was. So I said nothing more and rested my cheek in his hair, staring absently out at the sea.

“I have a question that I maybe should have asked before we did this,” Danny said as we started moving again. The sky was now a deep copper red, which meant we had to find somewhere to sleep for the night soon.

I glanced over at Danny as we walked along the coast, trepidation tightening my gut. “Yes?”

“Am I still going to age? Like… I guess like a human?” His blue eyes were worried as he looked over at me, and I was immensely glad that my hood was up to cover the smile that twitched on my mouth. “Am I going to spend the next four thousand years as a tiny, wrinkly bag of bones?”

I coughed to mask the wheezing chuckle that tried to escape. “No. You will still age, but it’s like…” I tried to think of how to word it. “It has stretched to match your lifespan, and for me, it has contracted. Our lifespans have aligned to match perfectly.” I wrapped my arm around his

shoulders to pull him closer. “We will be tiny, wrinkly bags of bones together when we are old.”

Danny grinned up at me, resting his cheek briefly on my shoulder. “Is it weird how happy that makes me?”

No. It wasn’t. Because the thought of it made me disgustingly happy too.

I kissed the top of Danny’s head. “For once, you’re not being weird.”

After a pause, he huffed and smacked my side. “Ass.”

I suppressed my snicker and pulled him tighter to me as we walked. When his jaw cracked with a wide yawn, I started looking around for somewhere we could sleep for the night. We wouldn’t find any shelter around here, but we had camped outside before. I would keep Danny safe.

In the end, we stopped for the night in a shallow cave by the beach that showed no signs of any creatures living in it. The walls were deep enough to shield Danny from the chilled breeze that came off the ocean at night. He fell asleep in my arms almost instantly after eating and sipping some water, exhausted from the long day of walking and the emotional upheaval he had experienced from our joining.

I zoned out for a while, staring out at the dark sky as I played with Danny’s hair, before tucking my hands under his shirt to feel the smooth warmth of his bare skin against mine. It was quiet here, this part of the coastline deserted, and I heard nothing all night except for the low snuffle of a small, ground-dwelling creature as it hunted for bugs in the grass. The sound of the waves lapping at the stone beach was strangely soothing.

By the time dawn came, I had drifted into my half-asleep state, a foreign kind of calm having washed over me. I wondered if it had something to do with my life being tethered to Danny’s. Whether he could now quiet my cluttered mind.

I stirred when Danny did, tightening my arms around him as he yawned into my neck. He groaned out a tired, gritty sound. “I’m getting too old for sleeping outside.”

I wheezed a chuckle. “You’re twenty-three.”

“Actually, I think I might be twenty-four by now.” Danny resituated his head on my chest and yawned again, fingers slipping between the buttons of my shirt to trace a particularly thick scar on my chest. “But it seems a little pointless to keep track now so, whatever. I hope we find a bed soon.”

“We will.” I kissed the top of his head, then made a face. “Well, not *soon*. But when we reach the city, we will be able to rent a room at an inne.

With a bed and a bath."

Our innes were similar to what inns had been like in the human world, before we crossed over. They still had them in the coastal cities, but they didn't seem like particularly pleasant places to stay.

Danny let out a low groan of pleasure at the thought. The sound caused my insides to go tight with arousal.

"That sounds so good," he mumbled into my chest, and I heard in his voice that he could easily fall back to sleep.

I slid a hand down his back to give his firm backside a not-so-gentle tap. "Time to get up."

I smirked as Danny jumped. He grumbled, reluctantly heaving himself up.

"The sooner we get moving, the sooner we reach the city," I told him. "Which means a bed and a bath."

"I'm up." He wiped a hand over his face and tried to pat down his hair, which was sticking up a little wildly on one side, before dragging his bag closer to get his water bottle.

I got to my feet and brushed off the back of my coat. "Are you hungry?" I asked Danny. "I can catch you something, if you want meat."

"I'm okay for now, but maybe if you see some fruit I can eat while we're walking, I'll have that."

Danny put his canteen back in his bag and got to his feet, stretching his arms up over his head. I took his bag from him in case his back was hurting from sleeping on the hard ground.

"Thanks," he said gratefully, adjusting the strap of his rifle.

I grunted and slung his backpack over my shoulder before taking his hand. When we stepped out of the cave, the sun was blindingly bright in the pale pink sky, and the air felt warm with a cool breeze. Danny took a deep breath and grinned over at me.

"This whole place smells so good, 'cause it smells like you."

I huffed. "You might not be saying that when we get to the city stables. The creatures that are used to pull transport here don't smell particularly wonderful."

Danny chuckled. "I'll take shallow breaths when we get there." He glanced over at me. "So what's it like? The city we're going to?"

"The city of Thinir," I told him, then thought about it. It had been many, many years since I'd visited. "It's not overly big, but it has an impressive

hyll."

"An… impressive hill?" Danny asked hesitantly.

My mouth twitched. "No, a different kind of hyll. Like a palace. The ruler of this part of the world has his seat of power there, because it's an important port city. It's small, but wealthy."

"You have rulers?" Danny looked over at me. "Like monarchs?"

"A bit." I shrugged. "They only really have dominion over the towns and cities. Moric Lor doesn't care about what happens out in the wild lands, where I nest. Where the tear is."

"Moric Lor? Is that the ruler's name?"

"His name is Lor. His title is Moric. Like king."

"Oh, okay. And he has a big palace, huh?"

I grunted. "Yes, the city is on a tall ridge, and the palace sits at the highest point to look down on everyone else. It's all very…" My lip curled. "Ostentatious."

Danny snorted. "I guess royalty are the same everywhere."

I huffed in amusement. "So it would seem."

"So it's a nice city then?" Danny asked. "It's, y'know, clean and not cramped? My only experience with cities is the shithole I grew up in and the creepy abandoned ones out in the Wastes."

I squeezed his hand. "It's nice, I suppose." I paused. "It's clean and affluent. Too many beings for my taste, though."

Danny laughed. "Any more than you and me is too many though, right?"

"Yes."

"Well, we don't have to stay long." Danny's long fingers tightened on mine. "But it'll be nice to sleep in a proper room with a bed. And a bath—shit, I can't wait to have a bath. It probably won't be as nice as those hot springs, though."

I smiled and glanced over at him, in time to see his expression jolt with sudden realisation.

"Wait—do we need money? For a room?" Danny worried his lower lip and looked over at his backpack, still slung over my shoulder. "Maybe I have something we can sell—"

"I have what we need," I interrupted him. "Don't worry."

Danny gave me a questioning look, so I reached into my satchel and pulled out a chunk of crystallised flower that I had snapped off at the hot springs before we'd left.

“Creatures pay a lot for this in the cities, because they believe it has healing properties, but most can’t be bothered to make the journey,” I told him. “We’ll sell it.”

Danny snorted a laugh. “You’re such a thief.”

I couldn’t stop myself from bristling, just a little. “It’s just a flower.”

I didn’t add that it was technically a black-market product, because it had been removed from a sacred spot. That would just make Danny start fretting over the fact that we’d fucked there.

I smiled a little at the memory of it.

We were still walking along the grassy edge of the beach, but the stones had turned to pinkish-brown sand, and the air was getting warmer the further north we travelled. This area was still deserted except for us, and I expected it to stay that way for a few more days. We may have still come across wild creatures, but as far as I was aware, nothing particularly dangerous lived around here.

When I saw the pinkish-brown sand dunes littering the beach up ahead, I realised we were about to pass through the territory of a herd of caffids. My mouth twitched with the start of a smile. Danny would like them.

“Let me show you something,” I said to Danny when we reached the first dune, pulling him with me as I stepped off the grass and onto the sand. Our boots left imprints behind us, the only sign that anyone had been here for a long time.

I brought us to a stop beside the dune, and nudged Danny forward. “Step up onto the sand dune.”

He quirked a brow at me with a tiny crooked smile, but let go of my hand to do it. The moment he placed one boot on the edge of the mound, the sand started vibrating.

Danny jumped out of his skin and practically tried to scale me when the mound of sand began to rise, grains cascading down in a waterfall.

“Shit!” he yelped.

I wheezed a hoarse laugh, wrapping my arms around him and holding him to me, even though he kept trying to tug me back—like he was protecting me. It was adorable. “Don’t worry, Danny. It’s safe.”

The mound kept rising, but it was no longer covered in sand. Now, the mottled brown back of the caffid was visible—a wide, slightly domed hump of scales that shimmered faint pink when the sunlight hit them just right.

Despite the scales, caffids were quite ugly. But Danny liked ugly things, so I was confident he'd like these. They were also incredibly placid, despite their intimidating size. They were wide but relatively flat, like a huge, shallow, upturned bowl.

The creature's stubby front flippers came into view, and then it lifted its wide, flat head from the sand to peer at us through tiny, beady white eyes.

I reached up to scratch the back of Danny's head. "It's a caffid," I told him. "They live in the sand and migrate to the ocean to mate every few years. It's gentle, I promise."

"It's huge." Danny's eyes were wide as he took in the creature in front of us. He stayed plastered to my side, but I could feel his fingers twitching with interest against my stomach. "So they just live here? In the sand?"

I nodded. "They feed on all the small critters that live in the sand with them."

As if on cue, the caffid's tongue emerged to taste the sand in front of it, and Danny let out a surprised sound. Caffid tongues looked like nerve networks, or the roots of a plant—a pasty white muscle that spread out across the sand, feathered tendrils blooming in every direction.

"All the little protrusions let it hunt through the sand for sea bugs," I told Danny.

"Looks really weird." He grinned up at me. "I'm into it."

I huffed in amusement. "I thought you'd like it."

"Its scales are cool." Danny finally dropped his arms from around my middle, but he tangled his fingers with mine before taking a hesitant step closer to the caffid. The big beast barely gave us a second glance as its tongue flickered out again.

But as Danny tentatively reached out to touch the creature's domed back, its tongue emerged yet again—and spread its network of tendrils over Danny's boot.

He jumped back immediately. "Nope, okay, I'm all good just looking." He tugged on my hand as I wheezed a chuckle.

The caffid let out a low rumble, like it didn't approve of what it had just tasted, and began shimmying its great body back down into the sand, its front flippers flicking sprays up over its back to cover it.

"So all these other sand dunes—that's more of them?" Danny asked as we walked back up onto the grass verge.

I nodded. “We’ll see them for the next couple of miles. They’re native to this area.”

“Cool.” Danny looked over at me with a smile, the sea breeze ruffling his dark hair across his forehead. “Thanks for showing me. I like your world,” he added, giving my hand a squeeze.

I huffed. “This part is fine. It’s empty and quiet. There are plenty of places that you wouldn’t like—trust me.”

“Where did you grow up?” Danny asked. “Was it around here?”

“No. When there were more of us, my kind lived to the south-west. Far from here.”

“How many more of you—more telyths—were there when you were born?”

“Not many more. Just the parents of my generation.” Our species had been dying out for a while. We were too long-lived, and procreated infrequently. The parasitic subspecies, however, was the opposite, spreading across this world and the next like a plague.

“There were eight more,” I told Danny. “I was an only child, and my parents died when I was just coming into adulthood.”

Danny squeezed my hand. “I’m sorry.”

I shrugged, feeling uncomfortable. “It’s part of life. I had many years with them before that.”

I didn’t bother telling Danny that telyths weren’t an overly affectionate species among family. We tended to be cold and indifferent by nature.

Edin’s friendship and his overbearing, touchy-feely nature had been my first experience of affection in that way. It had taken me a long time to get used to him throwing his arm over my shoulder or pulling me in close, horns almost touching. It was a gesture of immense trust—the equivalent of baring your throat to a predator.

I cleared my throat and continued. “Orlith has a sibling. His parents had two younglings. And the other two couples had two each.”

“And so, like Orlith said…” Danny sounded uncomfortable. “If some of you don’t have kids together, then… that’s it?”

I nodded. “We’ll be the last. But that is just another part of life, Danny. It’s not necessarily a bad thing. Species die out to make room for others.”

“I don’t like you talking like that about your kind.” Danny’s voice was adorably obstinate. “But I do have a question I’ve wondered about for a

while. I know you're a single-gender species, but do you all go by 'he'? You do, and Orlith does."

"Not all of us. Younglings are all referred to by a neutral term before they reach adulthood, when they can choose to keeping using that or pick something else."

"It's so weird thinking about you as a little kid." Danny grinned over at me. "Sometimes I just think you must have emerged from the earth as a fully formed adult. I can't imagine you as a tiny, cute little baby Wyn."

I wanted to hunch with embarrassment. "We probably aren't very *cute* to human eyes when we are infants."

"I bet you are." Danny swayed closer and nudged my hood aside with his nose to kiss my cheek. "I bet you were fuckin' adorable."

"Shut up," I grumbled. But he wouldn't, teasing me mercilessly until I finally shut him up by pulling him to a stop and claiming his mouth for long, long moments.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Paths worn into the grass by eons of walking feet turned into paved roads and stone bridges as we got closer to the city of Thinir. Closer to civilisation. We had been travelling for several days, but had only started coming across others in the last day or so. Tall, curious salyik and inquisitive vints who outright gawked at Danny.

A vint trader travelling in the opposite direction to us called out to ask if I was selling him, and what the price was. They squealed and scurried off when I snarled in response, making Danny jump as several pieces of fruit flew from the back of their cart and bumped down the road. At least he hadn't been able to understand what the little shit had been asking.

Danny grew more nervous the closer we got. I asked him several times if he wanted us to turn around, but he was determined to witness a city in my world, even though we avoided any form of city in the human world—both the coastal ones, and the ones abandoned by humankind when the creatures from this place travelled through. I wondered if he was eager for social interaction, or if it was pure curiosity.

"Is it really different?" he asked. "Are societies different?"

I thought about it. "In some ways. But I have found that most intelligent creatures, when they cluster together in close proximity, tend to act in similar ways." I looked over at Danny. "Our cities are more like the ancient civilisations in your world. Rome and Greece. Japan. Egypt."

"Really?" Danny's eyes brightened eagerly.

I nodded. "We are lucky that we haven't had an industrial revolution like you did. If the tear hadn't widened and caused civilisation to crumble, you would have destroyed your world anyway."

Danny grunted. "Yeah. Humans kind of suck, huh?"

I swayed closer to him as we walked. "Some of you are nice."

He grinned over at me. "*Some* of us?"

"One of you," I amended. "One human. You."

Danny burst out laughing. "What about Edin's friend Hunter? He was nice. And his friend seemed nice too—Charlie."

My lip curled in disdain. "He was an oaf. The other one I barely interacted with."

Danny rolled his eyes. “He wasn’t an oaf. And he was clearly *so* gone for Edin but he didn’t even realise it yet.” He paused. “We should go find Edin when we get back. To tell him this worked.”

I side-eyed him. “Why?”

“In case he and Hunter want to go to that place. With the gods.”

“They’re not gods,” I said absently. “And I am fairly sure the human oaf made it very clear he would *not* be staying with Edin, now that he has his friend back.”

He had just been happy to use Edin’s kind nature to get the other one, then he was going to fuck off back to the fucking military.

Danny made a noise in his throat. “I’ll put money on him staying with Edin.”

“I don’t need money.”

He chuckled. “Okay, I’ll bet something *else*. One of our wagers.”

That piqued my interest. “Alright.”

Danny laughed. “Oh yeah, of course, *now* you’re interested.” He thought for a second as we walked. “Okay, if Hunter is still with Edin when we find him…”

He stopped, turning to wrap his arms around my neck. I felt his warm lips kiss beneath my jaw within the depths of my hood. “I get to tie you up and do whatever I want with you for an entire night.”

My insides tightened with arousal. “Does it still count as a wager if I ask for the exact same thing if *I* win?” I rasped, sliding my hands up Danny’s sides.

He snorted a laugh against my neck. “What, you mean for *me* to tie *you* up?”

I nodded.

He laughed again, the low sound making my mouth want to curve up into a smile. “No,” he informed me. “It doesn’t.”

I shrugged one shoulder, jostling Danny’s chin before he moved back to grin up at me.

“Well then, for both our sakes, we better hope that oaf got some sense knocked into him during his fight at the prison.”

“Wyn,” Danny admonished as we started walking again, his arm around my waist and mine slung over his shoulders. “If they *are* still together—which they totally will be—then Hunter will be like your brother-in-law. You’ll have to be nice.”

The thought made me feel vaguely ill. “Never say that again, Danny.”

He gurgled a laugh. “Why do you dislike him so much?”

“Because he was using Edin.” I couldn’t stop the vehemence bleeding into my voice. “He didn’t care if he got hurt, as long as he was *useful* to him.”

“Come on, that’s not true.” Danny squeezed my side, frowning up at me. “He clearly cared about him. A lot.”

“You didn’t see how badly hurt Edin was when we left the koleb and behamot camp, Danny,” I told him, voice hoarse at the memory. “I had to carry him for most of the journey. He was barely coherent.” I exhaled. “It’s lucky he heals so fast.”

Danny looked upset at the thought. He cared about Edin very much. “Poor Edin. And he lost some of his horn, didn’t he? His horns were cool.”

I scowled but said nothing. Mine were better. *And* my left one had grown back after I lost it.

Edin may have had his non-scarring skin, but unless he lost the entire horn, the tip wouldn’t grow back. I’d rather keep my scars and have both horns intact, even though the experience of losing a whole one had been… unpleasant.

I wondered if Edin’s brutish human companion even knew that horns were a mark of virility. If he even knew what Edin had sacrificed for him.

I also wondered if I should let Danny know that complimenting Edin’s horns was basically the equivalent of stating his admiration for Edin’s cock. I decided against it.

Danny fell quiet for a while as we walked, then shook his head. “You could see that Hunter was devastated when Edin got hurt. He clearly cares about him.” He shot me a small smile. “Plus, they totally fucked when we stayed at that motel after you destroyed that parasite. Remember?”

I grunted. I did remember, because I’d had to listen to it. Humans built their walls too thin and my hearing was too good. The stupid military had truly thought that their little cells were soundproofed at that base—that I couldn’t hear everything they were saying in their viewing room as they watched me. I had just had to patiently wait until one of them slipped up and called Danny by his name and not just his soldier number.

It had taken a few days, though, and I had grown increasingly frustrated as any attempt to find out more about the faceless soldier failed. I hadn’t planned on staying in that depressing little cell for longer than a few hours

after getting ‘caught’. I’d just wanted to get in there so I could free all the creatures and bask in the glory of seeing the pathetic human military crumble under the might of the beings they wanted to control.

But then Danny had happened. So my plans were delayed. And then adapted. I couldn’t have given them all the information I was willing to share straight away, in case they stopped sending Danny in to talk to me, so I’d refused to talk for a while until that method had backfired, and I’d heard one of his limp-dicked superiors telling him they’d stop sending him if he didn’t get me to talk.

The whole time, I had been asking myself what the fuck I was doing. Why I was sitting there in that pathetic little cell instead of just freeing all the other creatures and joining them in massacring every human in that base. Why I was wasting time, hungrily devouring any little scrap of information that this faceless soldier would give me about himself. Why I was uncharacteristically *desperate* to see his face, to see all of him, to find out who he truly was.

I hadn’t understood it, but I hadn’t been able to stop myself. And then when I’d seen him, it was like some part of me that had always felt lodged or slightly out of place, even though I’d never noticed it, suddenly shifted. I felt whole.

A dark blot on the horizon caught my eye as we followed the path around a bend. “That’s Thinir,” I told Danny, pointing up at it.

The city resided on a ridge that jutted a little ways out into the sea. The Moric’s hyll sat at the very top, a tall and imposing shape cutting jaggedly into the sky, made of the same ancient black stone as the Caen an Sin. The rest of the city spiralled down the ridge, with the poorest part crammed in around the port. Trading ships were docked, while smaller fishing boats sat in the water closer to us—not many cargo ships came this way.

“Wow.” Danny sounded both impressed and uneasy. “It’s um… steep.”

My mouth twitched. “Yes.”

“Awesome.” His voice was faint.

I reached out and stroked my hand over the back of his head, fingers twining briefly with short strands of his hair. “Just think, sweet—soon you’ll have a bed and a bath.”

He grinned over at me salaciously. “*We* will have a bed and a bath.”

My hood was up, but my mouth spread into a wide, sharp grin at his words. Since leaving the Caen an Sin, we’d been camping out, which meant

very few opportunities for Danny to wash—which meant even fewer opportunities for me to play with his beautiful body. Danny was fastidious about his hygiene, so he got anxious when he didn't feel clean. The sea was too cold and full of dangerous things for me to even consider letting him anywhere near it.

It took us another hour or so to reach the ports. We passed others, but they gave us a wide berth, even as they eyed Danny with fascination or disgust or outright lust. Over the sounds of sailors and merchants shouting and loading their wares onto ships, I could hear voices alerting others that I was approaching. Even most creatures from my world found my kind unsettling—especially the species that could be infected by the parasites. Like humans, they had spun tales about us, making us the monsters from their nightmares.

I liked it, because it meant everyone tended to leave me the fuck alone.

Thinir's city gates were open but guarded by two hulking baregh, who eyed us warily as we passed, but stayed silent. I could tell that Danny was trying not to stare at all the different beings around us. I wanted to tell him not to bother being polite, because they were all openly gawking at him.

Because the city sprawled out over a steep ridge, not many buildings sat at the same level. Stone steps connected narrow walkways, and networks of small bridges crisscrossed overhead. The city stretched over a relatively compact area, which meant it was built up, with buildings piled on top of one another. Some on the bottom level were as old as the huge, black-stoned hyll that loomed over the entire city.

Most buildings were made of stone, and those that actually had roofs and not just another building placed on top were covered in thick moss. There was an open-air market near the gates, a catchall for tourists, with most of the stands selling useless trinkets and overpriced local wine. They were mainly manned by usho and vints, but a tall, timid-looking salyik sat in the corner selling pieces of intricate jewellery.

I didn't know if Danny wanted to explore the city thoroughly, but I could see he was tired from walking all day. I also knew that he would give me that big, beautiful smile if I found him somewhere with that bed and bath quickly, so I pulled him in the direction of the merchant whose shop was a front for their black-market dealings.

The interior was dim and murky when we stepped inside the small shop, the air thick with the fog of cloying incense. Danny coughed, trying to stay

quiet in the hushed ambience, so I turned to him and reached out to stroke his cheek.

“This won’t take long. Then I will find us a room.”

“No problem.” He smiled up at me, then glanced around warily before leaning closer. “Is this where you sell the—you know?” he whispered.

My mouth twitched. “Yes.”

“What do you want, telyth?” The vint merchant’s voice was rough from years of pipe smoking, coming from the depths of the shop. “If you stay here long, I won’t have any more business for the rest of the day.”

“It’s evening anyway,” I muttered back in their language as I led Danny deeper into the shop.

When the vint came into view, she was sitting behind the counter, sharp chin resting on her fist and a bored expression on her face. This one was old—too old to be scared of much anymore, even me. Her pointed ears were huge, folding over on themselves, weighed down heavily by the thick rings piercing their entire lengths.

The shop was already empty, so I reached into my satchel and pulled out the chunk of crystallised flower from the hot springs. But when I set it down on the counter, the vint didn’t even look at it.

She was too busy looking at Danny.

“Is this otherworld?” she asked with interest. “Where did you get this?”

“Do not even look at him,” I snarled, pulling Danny closer to my side. “Or I’ll rip your fucking eyeballs out.”

The vint rolled her eyes but looked away. Her expression perked up again when she finally noticed the crystal, though she tried to mask her interest. “You want to sell me this? Isn’t this illegal? Stolen from the sacred hot springs to the south? Why would I buy this, telyth?”

I wanted to snort at her overly innocent tone. “I don’t have time for this. Just name your price.”

She went to pick up the crystal, but stopped when I rested my blackened fingers over it. She let out a gruff sound. “I need to inspect it if I’m to consider buying it.”

I reluctantly removed my hand but watched her closely. She tried not to look too excited as she picked the chunk up and turned it over, running impossibly long fingers along one delicate crystal petal.

“Is everything okay?” Danny whispered into the silence. I wrapped my arm around him tight.

“Fine, my sweet.”

The vint lifted her head, big eyes straining with the desire to look at Danny again. “What language does it speak?” she asked, staring at me instead. “I’ve never heard that before.”

“Name your price or we leave,” I snapped, and the merchant huffed and looked back down at the crystal.

“Two hundred,” she said eventually.

That was insultingly low, but I’d expected it. “A thousand.”

The vint spluttered. “That’s ludicrous.”

“You have hundreds of doses there,” I told her. “And I know how much you sell them for, vint.”

She would chisel this piece into small chunks and grind them down to dust, selling the powder in vials for people to mix into their drinks. A thousand was already low, but I cared only about getting enough to find a decent room for Danny.

“Alright, five hundred.”

“Eight hundred,” I countered.

The vint made a big show of snorting and pushing the crystal away. “Forget it, telyth.”

“Alright.” I picked up the flower and turned to leave, keeping Danny tucked under my arm.

“Fine!” the vint burst out after we had taken only two steps. “Seven fifty.”

“Done.” I set the crystal down and waited as the merchant counted out the thin metal marks. “Nearly done, sweet,” I told Danny, but kept my eye on the growing pile of coins in case the vint tried to cheat me.

The vint slid the coins into a thin cloth bag and handed it to me. “Now unless you’re going to sell me what I’m not allowed to look at, telyth, kindly get out.”

I took the bag and turned again without another word, Danny’s hand gripping the back of my shirt beneath my coat.

“Did you get a good price?” Danny whispered as we left. “It looked like you weren’t going to sell it to them for a second there.”

I stroked the back of his head as we stepped out onto the street. Most of the market stalls were closing up for the night, so the crowd was thinning out rapidly.

“Yes, we got more than enough for a room,” I told Danny, leading us toward the nearest inne. It was expensive, because it was a lure for visitors and tourists, being so close to the city gates. But that meant the rooms would be nicer, at least.

When we stepped inside, the place was already crowded, but it started quieting as beings noticed us. Danny shifted uncomfortably beside me from the attention.

At least he couldn’t understand any of them when they started whispering, eyes tracking us as we wove our way between the tables to the bar at the far end of the long, narrow room.

“What is that creature with the telyth?” someone asked in a hiss, voice already hungry. “Is it a whore? Where did he get it from? Are there more?”

I snarled at the creature who’d said it, and he jumped violently, spilling half of what was in his glass. After draining what was left, face still pale, he and his friends got up and slunk out.

“It’s otherworld,” someone else was whispering to their companion. “From the tear. Have you seen one before?”

“Never,” their companion whispered back. “I thought they were smaller than that. And uglier.”

“I’ve never seen a telyth before either,” the first one hissed. “He’s *so* creepy. Thank the mabs they’re nearly extinct.”

When we reached the bar, the usho proprietor was already eyeing us warily.

“Calm down, we’re not staying down here,” I drawled, already anticipating the comments about how I would drive away all their customers.

“Ugh, that *voice*,” someone shuddered out behind us.

The usho swallowed, their thick neck rippling. “If you want a room, you can’t take that thing in with you,” they said, nodding at Danny with a look of distaste.

I gritted my teeth. “Watch your fucking mouth.”

“Aren’t they wild? I don’t let any other pets—”

“He’s not a pet,” I snarled.

“Well, it’s not allowed in the room.”

Cold, ruthless fury churned in my guts. I whirled around to face the crowded room, intent on teaching that usho prick—and anyone else who

was whispering about Danny—a lesson. My fingers twitched by my sides as every creature in the inne fell silent.

"If I see anyone looking at him," I began through gritted teeth, "or hear anyone referring to him as *it*, or a *pet*, or a *whore*, I will tear them open and decorate this pathetic little establishment with their innards. And I will do it slowly."

Every creature in the room remained unmoving. Half were staring at me in horror, the other trying their best to shrink down in their seats. I could hear the usho behind me panting furious but frightened breaths.

As I turned back to face the bar, Danny winced at the deafening scrape of dozens of chairs being shoved back. The floorboards reverberated under my boots with the thump of countless feet stampeding for the door.

"What's going on?" Danny whispered in a worried voice, gripping the back of my coat in a tight fist.

I stroked a soothing hand down the side of his neck, leaning in to kiss his temple, before fixing my gaze back on the usho. Their bumpy skin had turned an even more unpleasant shade of grey-green, and their bulbous eyes burned with helpless anger as they watched all their customers flee behind me.

"Now." I stared at the usho. "Are you going to give us a room or not?"

They spluttered with impotent despair. "You've driven all my customers away."

"You should probably take our business then," I drawled, stroking my fingertips up and down the side of Danny's neck as I held his nape in an admittedly possessive gesture.

The usho scowled, their wide mouth tilting down around their blunt, crowded teeth.

"Fine," they grated at long last as they pulled their ledger out from beneath the bar with shaking hands. "But you—you're paying for any damages to the room."

What the fuck did they expect us to do in there? I almost wanted to break something now, just to spite them. Would Danny think that was childish?

"Make sure there's a bath," I snapped instead of acknowledging what they'd said.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The usho's hands were still shaking when they reluctantly held out our room key several minutes later.

"Thank you for your hospitality," I drawled snidely, leading Danny toward the staircase up to the rooms.

"Wyn, what the fuck?" Danny hissed from behind me. "Why did everyone leave? Is it because we're staying here? What did you say to them?"

"I just told them to stop staring."

"Oh really?" He clearly didn't believe me. "Sure sounded like a little more than that. No wonder the monster behind the bar seemed pissed."

"Fuck them," I replied, huffing with amusement when Danny smacked my shoulder blade from behind me on the stairs.

"They'll hear you," he hissed.

"They don't understand English," I told him, but that was a good point, so I said a similarly vile insult in the usho's language, loud enough for it to travel back to the bar.

The inne's rooms circled a balcony that overlooked the empty bar on the floor below. I glanced down and smirked at the sight of the usho grumbling to themselves as they collected abandoned cups from the tables.

The bow of the key in my hand was shaped into a six, so I led us to the right room and unlocked the door. It was dark and cold inside.

"Usho," I shouted down, and the sound of cups knocking together stopped instantly. "We're expected to sit in the dark and cold in here?"

The usho muttered something under their breath. "I'll be right up to light your fire," they called.

"Now," I added in a mildly threatening tone, satisfied when I heard the usho's heavy footfalls clomping up the stairs a moment later.

They hurried past us carrying a basket of supplies and disappeared into the room.

I turned to Danny. "They're just getting the room ready," I told him, reaching up and cupping the side of his neck. "Are you hungry? Do you want me to go and find you something?"

“Um…” Danny rubbed his face, looking tired, but he still smiled up at me. Even when he was exhausted, he tried to stay cheerful, which made me love him even more. Especially as I was the opposite. When I was in a bad mood, I sulked. Overtly.

“Maybe something with carbs?” Danny asked me. “If that’s okay?” He hated asking me for things, as if he still wasn’t aware that I would give him literally anything he ever wanted.

“I’ll find you something,” I assured, wondering what I could get the kitchen here to make. There was a dish similar to porridge, which was bland enough that I wasn’t overly worried about whether it would affect Danny’s stomach. He hadn’t had any kind of bad reaction to the fruit and meat that he’d eaten—plus he was tethered to me now, which technically made him partly of this world.

The room flared with light from the white warmth of the fire in the hearth. The usho stood up and hurriedly lit some thick, lopsided candles dotted around the small space before slinking past us.

“All done,” they muttered, cringing as I stared them down from within the depths of my hood.

“Much appreciated,” I drawled, taking Danny’s hand and leading him into the room. I shut and locked the door behind us, placing the heavy key on the dresser beside the little clay token that was common in every establishment in this city.

“This is nice,” Danny said, shrugging off his backpack as he looked around.

I grunted, casting the room a cursory glance. Woven tapestries covered the stone walls to keep the heat in. Most were plain swathes of cloth in the muted grey and deep blue colours of the Moric’s insignia. A couple were more intricate, with depictions of city scenes embroidered into the fabric.

The floor was black boards that creaked under our feet. The bed was made of the same dark wood, large with high posts and covered in dark blue blankets that, thankfully, looked clean.

There weren’t many other pieces of furniture in the room. The wooden dresser with dripping candles on top, and a small table with two chairs beneath the narrow window. The tub sat in the corner of the room beside the fireplace, made of a burnished metal that gleamed in the firelight.

At least the room was warming up, thanks to the fire. “It’s clean and warm, so it’ll do,” I said to Danny, lifting the strap of my satchel over my

head to hang it on the back of one of the chairs.

"It's cool. I feel like I'm in a medieval tavern or something." Danny chuckled, sitting on the edge of the bed to unlace his boots.

"Medieval taverns in the human world smelled far worse than this," I commented as I crossed to the bath in the corner of the room. It was round and deep, with the water pipe coming up directly through the floor. After pushing in the metal plug, I pulled on the release so hot water began to pour into the tub. On a small table beside the tub sat a glass container of salt crystals, soaked in oils that were supposed to have a 'soothing' scent. I scooped out a handful and added them to the water, knowing Danny would like it.

"I'll go and get you some dinner. Keep the door locked, please." I crossed back over to Danny just as he was standing up to pull his shirt off.

"Okay." He leaned up to kiss me. "Thank you."

I dissipated and flowed through the keyhole out of the room before swooping over the railing to the main space below. When I resolidified directly in front of the usho slumped at the empty bar, they jumped violently.

"By the mabs," they gasped, clutching their chest.

I ignored their dramatic overreaction. "My partner needs food."

The usho seemed to recover swiftly, straightening up and scowling. "The otherworld creature, you mean?"

I leaned closer. "I mean my partner," I repeated in a more ominous voice, just to see their bumpy skin go pallid.

"I just sent the cook home." Their voice was hesitant yet still incredulous, like I was making some outrageous request. "Because you cleared out all my customers."

"Then it looks like *you'll* be cooking my partner's dinner, won't you?"

The usho scowled and visibly struggled with the urge to argue back. "What does i—" At my low snarl, they amended, "What does *he* want."

"*He* will have some ude." Ude was the porridge-like dish served in this part of the world. "With no spices. With some otya berries on top if you have them."

The usho's scowl intensified, turning their overly wide mouth down into their thick neck. "Fine. Anything else?"

I decided to ignore their snide tone. "A jug of water."

The usho gave a curt nod. "I'll bring them to your room shortly."

I waited until they had stomped back into the kitchen, before dissipating to follow them. When I resolidified directly beside them at the worn kitchen counter, pitted with knife marks, they jumped out of their skin.

“I’ll wait here,” I told them bluntly.

“But I—” The usho trembled with either rage or fear. I could see the swirling mix of both in their aura, clouding their squat, unpleasant form, but I didn’t particularly care which they were feeling in that moment, as long as they made Danny something to eat.

I folded my arms over my chest. “Best hurry, hmm?”

Their jowly face shook with irritation, but they stayed silent as they pulled out a thick, red metal pan before grabbing a clay urn from a shelf laden with various jars and containers.

I’d rather have been back up in the room with Danny—especially as he’d been getting undressed when I left—but this way the usho would be quick, and then we could be left alone for the rest of the night.

Sure enough, the usho was setting a steaming bowl of ude down on a tray less than ten minutes later. Roughly chopped otya berries were piled neatly on top. They filled a dented pitcher with fresh water and added it to the tray, alongside a simple wooden cup. Without saying a word, I took it and turned to smoke to head back upstairs.

When I resolidified back in the room, the tray in my hands, Danny was lounging in the bath. The air in the room was steamy and fragrant with the oiled salts that had dissolved in the hot water.

He grinned up at me, slicking back his wet hair. “That was quick.”

I carried the tray to the table and set it down, then picked up the steaming bowl of ude, a hand carved wooden spoon already poking out of the thick, pale golden sludge.

“This is similar to the porridge you humans eat,” I told him, carrying it over. “There are some of the berries you like on top.”

“Thanks.” Danny took the bowl from me and sat back in the bath. He dragged the wooden spoon through the ude before lifting a mouthful, blowing on it to cool it down.

“You gonna take your coat off now we’re in for the night?” he asked me with a raised brow, then took his first bite, his white teeth scraping the thick sludge off the wooden spoon.

I huffed and slipped off my coat, draping it over the back of the chair. Then I yanked off my boots before unbuttoning my shirt and discarding that

too. The room was quickly getting overly warm, thanks to the bath and the fire.

"This is good," Danny said as he ate another bite with half an otya berry on top. "Thanks for getting it for me."

"Of course." I grabbed the empty chair and dragged it over to the side of the tub so I could sit. Danny grinned when I dipped my hands into the water and smoothed them up his calves, lifting his legs so his feet were propped on the edge of the tub in front of my chest.

He sighed and relaxed back as I began running absentminded hands up and down his shins, content to just touch and watch him.

"You're spoilin' me, Wyn." Satisfaction flowed through me when I heard the spoon scraping the bottom of the bowl. Danny added, "What if I start demanding this kind of treatment every night, huh?"

"Then I'll give it to you," I told him immediately, even though I knew he was just teasing. "We can stay here. Or somewhere else in this world. I can buy you a house. I have riches. They're just gathering dust in my nest."

I dipped my head to kiss the sensitive inner arch of his foot, looking up at him through my eyelashes. "Is that what you want, Danny?"

He shivered with sensitivity. "That sounds real nice." I could hear in his voice that he was tempted. Ultimately, though, Danny was too good a person. Far better than me. "But we can't just let parasites overrun the country back home."

I grunted, propping my chin on a fist as I smoothed my fingertips through the dark hair plastered to Danny's shin, making swirling patterns with the short, wet strands. "I could get Orlith to cover my area," I said. "He has no life."

Danny snorted. "You're so mean. No, that's not fair. But…" His voice turned wistful. "Maybe one day? We could find somewhere here, somewhere quiet. Just me and you."

The stab of *want* that hit me was so sharp, I almost physically flinched from the force of it. "Yes," I rasped, voice hoarse, leaning over again to kiss his ankle. "We'll do it. I promise."

I'd never had better motivation to eradicate those fucking parasites once and for all.

"Hey, I was wondering…" Danny stretched his arm out to place his empty bowl on the little table to the side of the tub. "What's that weird thing on the dresser? With the stubby arms and legs?"

I huffed. “It’s a token. For the mabs. There’ll be one in every room, and behind the bar downstairs too. They’re offerings in exchange for health and virility.”

Danny stared at me. “For the mabs? The two giant dudes we saw?”

I grunted. “Some regard them as gods.”

“What?” Danny nudged my cheek with his big toe. “You told me they weren’t gods!”

“They’re not.” I grabbed his foot. “Not to me, anyway. They’re just ancient.”

Danny snorted. “*You’re* ancient.”

“Exactly. I’m not a god, am I?”

“Okay, I get your point, but they *felt* like gods.” Danny shivered. “They felt different. I had that weird reaction to them. It was like I… like I was seeing something I shouldn’t.”

I scowled. “You said that was how you felt the first time you saw *me*.”

After a pause, Danny burst out laughing. “It *was*.” He sat up in the bath and leaned forward, propping his elbows on the ledge either side of my arms. “I promise—your initial presence was *way* more terrifying and overwhelming than anything else, ever.”

I closed the gap between us to kiss him, somewhat mollified. “Fine.”

“Except for those giant guys,” Danny added after a kiss, ruining it. “They are *definitely* something more. I can see why people think they’re gods.”

I leaned back, resisting the urge to purse my lips in disagreement. “I’ll take your bowl back downstairs,” I said, standing up to grab it.

Danny barked out a laugh. “Don’t sulk, Wyn. I *promise* you’re the most intimidating. All humans piss their pants when they see you. Except me and Hunter. And maybe his friend.”

“I’m sure I could make Edin’s human piss his pants if I wanted to,” I muttered, picking up Danny’s empty bowl. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

I turned to smoke and left through the keyhole again. Seeing as I was wearing only my pants, I didn’t bother resolidifying to unnerve the usho anymore. I just dropped the bowl on bar, smirking to myself when they jumped as it appeared out of thin air, and returned to our room.

When I flowed back through the keyhole, Danny was out of the bath but still gloriously naked. He was standing by the dresser with the token for the

mabs in his hands, and glanced over from examining it to grin at me when I resolidified.

I was instantly distracted by his beautiful body. The candles and firelight danced over all his smooth, golden skin on display, still gleaming from the bath. My fingers twitched with the urge to slide down his sides and over his hips.

So I stepped closer and did just that.

Danny laughed, the sound throaty, as one arm wrapped around my neck while his other hand placed the token back on the dresser. “Guess there’s no point in me gettin’ dressed, huh?”

“No, there is not.” I dipped my head to kiss him, my insides twisting with pleasure when Danny made a soft sound against my mouth. His other arm came around my neck as he plastered himself to my front. I slid my hands down his smooth, warm back and over the swell of his ass.

Danny grinned against my mouth, then broke the kiss to look up at me. His hands came around to cup my face.

“I love you, Wyn,” he said, voice slightly hoarse. His Adam’s apple bobbed. “I’m so glad I met you. And that I get to spend the next few thousand years with you,” he added, grinning up at me.

My throat ached. I swallowed convulsively, wishing I still had my coat on and my hood up to hide how vulnerable I felt as I stared back at him, unable to control the naked adoration that I knew was showing on my face.

“I love you, too.” I wrapped my arms around his waist, pulling him tighter to me. “You were always meant to meet me. You’re mine.”

Danny grinned again and kissed my chin. “I never really believed in fate, or soul mates, but… I think you’re mine.”

“I *am* yours,” I said, tone domineering as I dropped my hands to palm his ass.

Danny choked out a laugh and circled my neck with his arms. “Okay, fine, sorry. You *are* my soul mate.”

I grunted my approval and leaned down to kiss him, intent on showing him just how perfect he was for me.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Danny moaned into my mouth, tugging me with him as he blindly backed up toward the bed. I wanted to grin at his eagerness. Instead, I hefted him into my arms, huffing with amusement against his mouth when he yelped, his legs snapping around my waist.

Danny tore his mouth from mine. “Shit, Wyn, don’t drop me.”

“As if I’d drop you.” I blindly pushed the blankets aside to lay Danny on the mattress, following him down so my hips were nestled between his thighs.

Danny’s hands immediately shot down to undo my pants as he kissed me again. I sucked in a sharp breath when he loosened the fastening enough to burrow his hand inside and cup me. Danny groaned into my mouth, tongue thrusting against mine, as he crooked two fingers and slipped them inside.

I snarled, breaking the kiss to scrape my sharp teeth against his jaw as my hips bucked toward his hand. Danny’s long fingers stroked my channel, the tips trailing up and down the length of my shaft, still tucked inside me. The sensation made me shudder hard.

I felt Danny grin against my cheek. “Feel good?” he murmured, even though he knew it did.

I was about to answer when his thumb dipped just inside me to circle the leaking tip of my cock, and I could do nothing more than let out a low, helpless moan as my knees went weak.

My cock pushed insistently against his thumb, so Danny slid his fingers free to wrap them around the head as it emerged. I shuddered, panting against his cheek as my prick pushed through his fist.

The last thing I wanted to do was pull away—especially when Danny turned his head to kiss me again and started stroking my cock with slow, tight pulls—but I needed to get my pants off. The urge to be completely bare against him was pressing, urgent.

I leaned back and stripped them off in hurried movements, then moved my knees to the outside of Danny’s hips so I was straddling him when I leaned back down to take his mouth. I blanketed him with my body, my cock pushing insistently against his on his flat, tight stomach.

“Mm.” Danny moaned into my mouth and clutched at my back, hips arching up to press us even closer together. He started to move beneath me, sliding the stiff length of his cock against mine, shuddering when his balls and the very base of him brushed against my slick opening.

I sat up, holding myself up on outstretched arms, my hands pressing against the mattress either side of Danny’s neck. I began countering his thrusts, grinding down on him so the entire length of his cock slid over the very base of my shaft where it emerged from my slit, back and forth.

“Ungh, fuck,” Danny groaned through gritted teeth, lifting his head to look down between our bodies and watch as his shaft became slick where it rubbed against me. His brows pinched with arousal, fingertips digging into my sides as desperation made that beautiful flush rise in his chest and throat.

The next time Danny moved to thrust against me, I shifted my hips, tilting them just right so that his cock sank inside.

“*Fuck*,” he barked, shuddering hard. He let out a ragged breath, knees falling open wider as his hips strained to push his cock even deeper inside me.

“Goddamn, I love it when you do that,” he gritted out through clenched teeth, hands sliding down my sides to clutch my thighs.

I nearly laughed, but the feel of his cock bucking inside me made me let out a pleasured snarl instead. There was nothing sweeter than being joined with Danny this closely, whether he was inside me or I was inside him.

“Shit, Wyn.” Danny was panting, hands gripping me restlessly as his hips twitched beneath me. “I’m already so hard it hurts.”

I made a low sound of sympathy and tightened around him, just to hear the helpless groan rise from his throat as his head ground back into the pillow.

When we fucked like this, sometimes he liked me to hold him down and ride his cock hard, and sometimes—when I let him—he liked to be in control. I decided to let him be in control this time, so I leaned down and nipped his earlobe.

“Why don’t you get me on my back and fuck me as hard as you can, Danny?” I rasped in his ear, grinning wickedly when he sucked in a shaky breath and his cock twitched inside me.

I huffed in amusement as Danny shoved me onto my back with hurried, jerky movements. He kissed me hard as he pushed on my knees, spreading

my legs wide, and sank his cock back inside.

I shuddered and snarled against his mouth, lifting a hand to fist his hair, holding him to me as our tongues thrust together hungrily. Danny rested his weight on his elbows either side of me and flexed his hips, moaning low into my mouth when I tightened around him in response.

His hips bucked again, sharper and harder, and I grinned against his mouth. When Danny was in charge, our fucking tended to be fast and frantic. He hadn't been doing this all that long, so the pleasure was still deliciously novel and exciting to him. Not that it wasn't exciting for me too, but I liked to think I had marginally better control than Danny.

Sometimes.

I let out a low groan as his cock pumped inside me, the flared head catching on that extra-sensitive spot that made my fingertips tingle with intense pleasure. My own prick ached, jerking between us with each of Danny's thrusts, the trail of hair leading from his navel teasing me with the rough friction.

I finally broke our messy, hungry kiss to graze my teeth over Danny's chin, then his jaw. "Harder," I rasped in his ear, insides twisting with pleasure at the sound of his helpless answering groan.

He kissed frantically along my jaw, beneath my ear, down my throat, before burying his face in my neck as he fucked me even harder. The old bed was squealing and creaking obnoxiously, leaving no doubt about what was happening in this room. The thought gave me lurid satisfaction. This was payment for their poor treatment of Danny. They could listen to him fucking me in their stupid old bed in their pathetic little room.

Danny's teeth worried the bend of my neck, making me snarl with pleasure. I clenched my hand in his hair, holding him to my throat, wanting him to bite harder. When he did, I shuddered and bucked my hips. The wet sounds of him fucking me were obscene, and I loved it.

I loved him. In that moment, it hit me that I would have him—I would have this—for the rest of my life. Our lives. My throat closed up with emotion, even as everything within me tightened from the accompanying burst of pleasure at the realisation.

I would have him forever.

I shuddered, legs snapping around him, baring my teeth as I snarled up at the ceiling. "Danny—" I gripped him too tight, caging him in with my

whole body, but he just moaned against my neck and bit harder, shuddering in my grasp.

The heat burst, expanding over every inch of me, flooding Danny's thrusting cock with my orgasm as I spasmed around him. The teasing rasp of the hair on his stomach, the slick slide of his sweat-dampened skin, made my cock swell harder and throb until it shot long ribbons between us, slicking the frantic slide of Danny's chest and stomach against mine as he thrust.

I seized up from the overwhelming pleasure of it—both the physical, and the release of the emotional burden I had carried for a while now. The worry about always keeping Danny safe, the fear of losing him, the constant, anxious urgency over how short a time I would have had with him. It all fled, leaving nothing but my overwhelming love for him, causing the pleasure to loop around my body. I shook, squeezing so hard around the stiff length of him inside me that he let out a choked groan, hips going still. He held his cock as deep inside me as he could.

"Fuck—Wyn—" He bit my shoulder hard as his hips bucked once, twice, then a few more times as he came, trembling in my arms, groaning from deep within his chest. I could feel the throb of his cock inside me, and it made me smile with intense gratification. Danny was mine. I would be the only one who got to see him like this. Who got to feel this with him.

His teeth released their clamp on my shoulder, and he kissed my neck with a breathless, sated sound. I used my grip on his hair to gently lift his head until I could kiss his mouth, aching to show him how much I loved him.

"Mmm." Danny smiled against my mouth, breaking the kiss to nuzzle my cheek. "Guess I did good, huh?"

I huffed, gentling my grip in his hair to run my fingers through the soft strands. "You always do good."

"Well that's lucky, seeing as you're stuck with me now for thousands of years." Danny heaved himself onto his back beside me with a sated groan, the bed creaking as his weight settled.

I rolled onto my side and draped an arm and leg over him, his skin hot and slightly damp. I kissed his shoulder. "Do you feel different?" I asked him.

Danny manoeuvred an arm under my neck so he could wrap it around my shoulders, pulling me closer. He thought about it for a moment, gazing

up at the ceiling with sleepy, sated eyes. His hand slid down the arm that was draped over his belly until he reached my fingers.

He shrugged, jostling my head as he started spinning the ring on my thumb. “Not really. Maybe a bit. I just came insanely hard.”

He turned his head on the pillow and pressed his grinning mouth to my forehead. “I hope that’s a side effect. Super orgasms.” He let out a little gasp, and I knew without a doubt what he was about to say.

“Don’t say—”

“*Monster* orgasms.”

I rolled my eyes. “You are ridiculous.”

Danny grunted another soft, well-fucked sound as he stretched out all his limbs, clearly getting ready to fall asleep. “Get used to it, old man.”

I huffed to hide the rush of joy I felt. “I suppose I’ll have to,” I drawled, watching him as his eyes drooped closed and his features softened.

I sat up to grab the blankets and pull them over him. The fire was burning low already, seeing as the usho hadn’t bothered to build it properly in the first place, but it didn’t matter.

As Danny drifted off, he turned and shuffled back into the cradle of my body. I smiled against his shoulder and wrapped my arm around his middle, holding him to me tight.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

Danny's newfound indestructibility made itself known the following morning, in the least dramatic fashion possible.

He tripped.

Danny wasn't particularly clumsy, but he was somewhat… graceless. The staircase in the inne was narrow and warped, but he made it back downstairs fine as we were leaving to explore the city.

It was when we were mere feet from the door in the still-empty bar that he tripped on an invisible obstacle and stumbled forward. My hands shot out to grab him, managing to keep him mostly upright, but he'd already tried to stop his fall by grabbing onto the narrow trunk of the decorative potted plant at the side of the door.

"Motherfucker," Danny gritted out as he yanked his hand back.

I gently cradled it, turning it to look at his palm and wincing when I saw the dozens of fat thorns embedded deep in his skin.

"You must be careful." Worry made my tone harsh.

"I didn't—There was something on the floor." Danny's voice was tight, telling me he was in pain, but still gruff with embarrassment.

"Luckily this is just a marast tree." I stroked my thumb over Danny's inner wrist to try and soothe him. "The trunk is covered in these to stop small creatures climbing it to reach its fruit, but they're not poisonous."

"That's interesting," Danny got out through clenched teeth. "And very effective, because this fucking hurts."

I hated that he was in pain, but he wasn't in any immediate danger. Besides, seeing as the tether had worked, that surely meant—

I couldn't help it—I grinned wide when I saw the thorns start rising from his palm, getting pushed out as his body rejected them. His blood was stark red against his skin, but there wasn't much—it had already stopped flowing from the numerous small wounds.

When the fat thorns fell to the floor in a light shower, Danny flexed his hand, looking somewhat unnerved. "So that's a thing now, huh?"

"You heal fast." I tried to stop smiling but couldn't. "Your body will reject foreign matter."

“That’s gonna take some getting used to.” Danny stared down at his palm, still cradled in my hands. I gently thumbed away some of the blood to see the wounds, pink and already closed over. Relief almost made my knees weak.

It had truly worked.

“It may scar,” I warned him.

Danny shrugged, grinning up at me. “I don’t care. I like your scars.”

I huffed in disbelief.

“I do.” Danny wiped his palm on his pants and wrapped his arms around my waist, tilting his head back to grin up at me. “They’re sexy.”

Humans were very strange. Or maybe it was just Danny.

“Well, at least we know that the tether truly worked.” I cupped his shoulders. “Now I won’t have to panic every time you trip over your own feet.”

“I don’t trip over my own feet!” Danny gave my stomach a weak shove and stepped back.

“You just—”

“Come on, let’s go,” he interrupted me, grabbing my hand and tugging me toward the door. “I want to explore.”

I decided to let it go, because I was too relieved. I would still worry over him, but at least it wouldn’t be a constant, pressing fear that the smallest injury could get infected and kill him.

We ignored the hostile glares, curious gawking and looks of disgust from others as we started making our way through the city. Some creatures practically salivated over Danny, but he seemed thankfully oblivious to the leering attention.

He was too busy staring openly at the buildings and market stalls, as well as trying to sneak furtive glances at creatures he hadn’t previously seen. The buildings here were made from local purplish-brown stone, with lopsided doorways and uneven floors thanks to being built staggered up the steep streets.

Thinir was mostly populated by two main species, vints and usho, while the smaller community of salyiks were relegated to the poorer areas close to the port, for no reason other than they were the minority. It seemed the two worlds had that kind of prejudice in common, at the very least.

We walked all the way up through the city to the Moric’s hyll at the very top. Moric Lor was a vint, which meant most of his staff were also vints,

though all the guards were baregh because they were big and bulky.

Vints tended to be less bothered about my kind, so the hyll staff who scurried past as we walked through the public gardens mostly ignored us, aside from a few curious glances at Danny. The baregh guards eyed us with silent disinterest from their posts.

“Best not to touch any plants, sweet,” I told Danny as we walked slowly under a thick, lush canopy of gigantic moros vines. “The Moric is a vint—like that shop owner yesterday—and lots of vints are keen botanists who specialise in deadly plants. Lor is no exception.”

“Oh.” Danny inched closer to me. “So these are all poisonous plants?”

“Not all. And some of the poisonous ones need to be ingested or treated first to do harm. Some are deadly even to the touch, though, so it’s best to be safe. Even with your improved resilience.”

“Why does he have a garden of plants that can kill you?” Danny asked uneasily, slipping his arm beneath my coat to wrap around my waist.

“Because he’s a show off. These come from all over the world. Some are extremely hard to keep alive in this climate.”

I curled my lip at the display of huge, bright himic blooms. They glittered in the sun in various shades of orange and yellow, but their deep burgundy pollen burned the throat like acid when it was disturbed and inhaled.

“It’s a gaudy display of wealth and power,” I continued. “He has an entire stable of gardeners who spend every waking moment tending to his gardens. There are creatures in his city starving, yet he spends all that money on employing staff to grow *inedible* plants. He’s a selfish, elitist fool.”

Danny shot me an amused look. “You’re kind of anti-establishment, huh?”

I gave a stiff shrug. “I’m just against creatures receiving immense amounts of wealth and power over others, simply for being born into a certain family.”

Danny laughed. “Right.”

I got the feeling he would quickly start teasing me if we continued this conversation, so I tugged on his hand to lead him over to the stone balcony at the edge of the gardens.

“Look, sweet.” We stopped at the thick, ornate stone balustrade that overlooked the port. “We’re at the highest point in the city. Well, except for

the Moric's hyll."

"Wow." Danny rested his hands on the stone and peered over hesitantly, swallowing when he realised how high up we were.

"Great view." He shot me a wry grin. "Worth the climb."

I huffed, stepping closer to smooth my hand up the long line of his back. We stood in silence for a few moments, looking out over the port. The sea glittered pale purple in the weak sun, and the big shipping boats looked small from up here. The sailors and merchants were nothing more than specks scurrying across the dark wooden planks of the port.

The beach stretched, flat and sandy to the south, the direction we'd come from. The peaks of the Arin Mountains were faintly visible to the north, cutting across the land like a great wall.

I thought about what Danny had said the night before—about us eventually finding somewhere to settle here. Warmth flooded me at the thought of it. I wondered where else in this world I could show him. I wanted to show him all of it. I wanted him to experience everything he could.

"How long do you want to stay here?" I asked, sliding my hand up to cup the nape of his neck.

"I don't mind. It's nice here." Danny shot me a crooked grin as he knocked his shoulder into my arm. "This is kind of like our honeymoon, huh?"

It took me a moment to realise what he meant. I huffed. "I suppose." I looked over at him. "You mean like… we are married?"

I tried very, very hard to ignore the intense squirming sensation in my belly. It wasn't nerves. It was just… anticipation for his answer.

Danny's throat went a little splotchy. He shrugged uncomfortably. "I mean, if you don't mind that term. It's probably a human construct, right? Marriage? I was just being silly."

His nerves made something hot and sweet pierce my chest. "But you are human," I said, turning him to face me and smoothing my hand down the back of his head. "Which means it might be important to you. And it is. Yes?"

Danny fidgeted. "I mean, I'd never even thought about it before but… I like the idea of being married to you. In whatever way that is. Is that stupid?"

“No,” I rasped immediately, stepping closer and cupping his face in my hands. “I like the idea of it too. Whatever we want to call it. Joined. Tethered. Married.”

Danny beamed up at me, hands slipping beneath my coat to stroke my scarred back through my shirt. “Yeah? Me too. I don’t care what we call it.”

For once, I wished my hood was down so I could smile back at him. We were in public though, so I didn’t lower it. Instead, I stroked my thumb over his cheekbone. “Did you want to… Humans have a ceremony, yes?”

Danny chuckled. “Yeah. With cake and rings. I don’t need ‘em.”

But my eyes homed in on the bone rings adorning every one of my fingers.

“I can give you a ring,” I said quickly, pulling my hand back to slip off the one on what humans called the ring finger on my left hand. I was sure that was the marriage finger. I didn’t want to ask and look ignorant, though, and Danny didn’t correct me, so I was probably right.

“Oh, okay.” Danny’s voice sounded soft with nerves, and his throat was still splotchy. “I—Only if you want to—”

I ignored him, taking his left hand and slipping the ring onto his finger. Cradling his hand in mine, I stared at the ring now sitting snug on Danny’s long finger and swallowed, glad he couldn’t see how ludicrously happy it made me seeing it on him.

I tore my eyes away to look at him when Danny grinned up at me, a blindingly brilliant smile, before he looked down at the ring on his hand. “Hey, I’ve always wondered—are these made of bone?”

I nodded, using our tangled fingers to tug him closer so I could lean forward to kiss him.

Danny’s brows twitched. He ducked my mouth and stared at me expectantly. “Animal bone though, yeah?”

I shook my head. “The bones of my mortal enemies,” I told him before pressing my lips to his.

Danny made a muffled sound of alarm against my mouth, but kissed me back before pulling away. He laughed nervously. “You’re teasing me, right?”

I paused. “Of course I am, sweet,” I told him in the most soothing tone that I could manage, hiding my right hand behind my back as my fingers started tapping out their pattern on my thumb.

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DANNY

Did I feel different?

Kind of, yeah. I felt closer to Wyn, which I hadn't thought was possible —I'd already felt closer to him than any other thing in the universe. But it did feel different now. Like we were vital to each other. Well, *more* vital. He'd already felt vital to me.

It'd freaked me the fuck out seeing my body literally reject those thorns in front of me. Seeing the wounds heal over, moments after they were inflicted. But I was pragmatic enough to realise what an immense relief this ability would be, for both me and Wyn, when we were back in the Wastes. I'd no longer have to worry about infections from tiny cuts or bug bites or whatever. I still vividly remembered Wyn's quiet but intense worry when I was injured after the military caught us.

Wyn was determined to get me some cake to "complete" our silly little human wedding, despite me insisting that I didn't need it. I couldn't stop twisting the ring on my finger with my thumb, though, feeling like a total idiot for how giddy the weight of it there made me.

Hand in hand, we made our way back down through the city from the Moric's hyll. This place was weird, but in a good way. It was like we'd stepped back in time, except there was also a load of monsters roaming around. Even though I liked to think I wasn't prejudiced when it came to monsters, it was still pretty surreal to just be among them and not have at least one of them trying to kill or eat me.

It felt like mainly wild and uncivilised monsters had gone through to the human world. But I supposed that made sense, seeing as the tear was located way out in the middle of nowhere on this side.

Halfway back down through the city, Wyn tugged me into a little bakery. It was located in one of the many tiny stone buildings, with a big front window displaying rows of weird looking pastries. The interior smelled…

interesting, and I eyed the dark purple blocks of *something* studded with other, equally unrecognisable white things that were stacked neatly on a platter, as I stood beside Wyn while he barked at the monster behind the counter in their language.

I swallowed, silently praying that this was better than that oatmeal stuff he'd gotten for me the night before. That had tasted awful, but I hadn't wanted to tell him. Plus, I'd been hungry, and I wasn't going to be a dick and refuse food. Everything else I'd eaten here had been great, but the smell in this bakery told me that I wasn't going to be that lucky this time.

Dread filled me when the monster carefully placed something from the counter into a little loose wrap that looked like it was made from stiff, dried leaves. Wyn handed over some coins and took the package, leading me back outside.

With his free hand, he pulled me over to a small stone bench tucked against the side of a building, under a tree with pale red leaves that drooped, kind of like a willow. I wiped my palms on my thighs as we sat, trying not to look nervous.

"Here." Wyn held out the little package. I took it after only the briefest hesitation, telling myself to just get through it and nod enthusiastically when Wyn asked if it was good.

"You didn't have to," I told him, tentatively opening the wrap and staring down at what was inside. It actually… didn't look too bad, though the colours were a little questionable.

It looked like a flat rectangle of pastry under a thick layer of pale green cream. I told myself it was pistachio. On top of that was another layer of big, curling brown flakes of something. I told myself it was chocolate-coated coconut.

"It's a delicacy here," Wyn told me, fingers twitching on the bench between us. "I know you don't like overly sweet things, so I picked this because it isn't all that sweet."

My heart melted even as the dread worsened. If it had been tooth-achingly sweet, it would have been easier to just force down.

"Looks real good," I said, lifting it carefully from the wrap. "Thanks, baby."

He grunted. "I'm not stupid."

"Huh?" My head jerked up, guilt twisting my insides even as the relief that I wouldn't have to eat it made my shoulders sag.

“I know human weddings are more than cake and rings,” Wyn said. *Oh*. “But at least I can do this for you.”

Oh fuck. Okay. I had to eat the fucking cake now. How could I not after that?

Taking a quick breath, I lifted the cake—pastry—*thing*—to my mouth and took a huge bite, trying not to grimace as I expected the worst.

But it was actually… good. I slowed my frantic chewing when I realised it tasted like buttery, flaky pastry and lightly sweetened cream. The weird brown curls on top added a nutty crunch.

“Damn, this is really good,” I said with my mouth full, regretting taking such a big first bite now that I actually wanted to savour it.

“Yes? You like it?” Wyn’s distorted voice was quietly pleased. I slid closer to him on the bench to lean my cheek on his shoulder as I swallowed.

“Yeah, it’s great. Thank you.” I rested my free hand on his thigh. “Do you want some?”

Wyn shook his head, leaning down to nuzzle my hair. “Enjoy it.”

Monsters were staring at us, and had been since the moment we’d set foot in the city, but I ignored them as I finished my cake. I couldn’t even tell if they were more shocked by the sight of me or Wyn, but I supposed it didn’t really matter.

When I was done, I carefully folded the stiff leaf wrap the cake had come in and tucked it into my bag. I wanted to keep a memento from our trip. Wyn didn’t comment, but I could tell that he was pleased.

We stood and carried on making our way back down through the city, hands linked. I felt pleasantly full, and the sun was warm in the pale pink sky. At first I’d been anxious to be in such a busy place, but all the monsters here gave us a wide berth anyway, so it wasn’t too overwhelming. It was kind of… nice knowing that pleasant, normal cities still existed, even if they weren’t in my world.

True civilisation still existed somewhere. Life had carried on as normal somewhere. It was a surprisingly comforting thought.

“Maybe we can stay one more night and start heading back tomorrow?” I said to Wyn. I wanted to make the most of that bed. And the bath. Heat sizzled in my gut as I thought back to the night before. “Maybe two more nights,” I amended, squeezing Wyn’s fingers.

He huffed. “We can stay as long as you’d like. We’re in no rush.”

We weren’t, but I did want to get back so we could go and find Edin. I was positive Hunter would have stayed with him. It had been embarrassingly obvious how smitten he’d been with Edin, when I was pretty sure he hadn’t even realised it himself.

And I wanted Edin to be happy. If he was with Hunter still, he deserved to have him for as long as he could.

Plus, it would mean I’d get to tease Wyn for literal centuries about having Hunter as an almost-brother-in-law.

“Can we visit the hot springs again on the way back?” I asked Wyn, face getting hot at the memory of what we’d done there. I was pretty sure Wyn had lied about it not being a sacred place.

“Of course.” The low rasp to Wyn’s voice told me he was remembering it too. His hood cocked as he looked over at me. “First we’re going to fuck in that bed again, though. A few more times at least.”

My face went red. “Wyn,” I hissed, looking around self-consciously.

“None of them can understand us, Danny,” he drawled with a careless wave of his blackened fingers. But the knowing look that one of the slim, dark-skinned monsters with big, pointed ears shot us as they passed made me think they understood what Wyn had said perfectly.

He let go of my hand to wrap his arm around my shoulders, pulling me in to his side. “I’m sorry, sweet. I didn’t mean to embarrass you.”

“It’s okay.” I slipped my arm under his coat. “And I am totally on board with that plan. For the record.”

Wyn huffed in amusement. “Noted.”

It hadn’t truly sunk in yet that I was going to be alive for a very, very long time. Honestly, thinking about it too hard made me feel panicky, so I decided it would probably be better to take it one day at a time to begin with.

The knowledge that I would have a long time with Wyn filled me with sweet warmth, so much of it that it felt like I would burst. Suddenly, it seemed like we had all the time in the world. And we did, in a way.

“So, you’re gonna buy me a big, fancy house one day in the distant future, huh?” I teased as the inne we were staying at came into view below.

“Yes.”

I chuckled at his serious tone. “Why don’t we just go take over that little stone cottage we stayed in our first night here? It was abandoned anyway.”

Wyn snorted a derisive sound. “I am giving you a better house than that.”

“I liked it!” I protested. “It was cute. Plus it was deserted, in the middle of nowhere—your favourite. And it wasn’t all that far from the hot springs.” I lowered my hand to slip it beneath his shirt, trailing my fingertips over thickly scarred skin. “We can go visit whenever we want.”

Wyn’s hood tilted toward me. “I will give you a house with your own private hot spring, my sweet. And proper indoor plumbing.” He made a disgusted sound in his throat. “You are not living in a *shack*.”

I laughed. “It was not a shack. But fine. We have time to decide, right?”

I looked up at him, wishing I could see his face. When his hood turned as he looked back down at me, I was just able to see the pale jut of his chin, and all his sharp teeth on display as he grinned.

“Yes,” he said. “We have time.”

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ORLITH

If Wyn got to have a human pet, I wanted one too.

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Author’s Note

Okay, so I’ve done some major backtracking here.

You know how I was previously adamant that the humans would live normal-length human lives, so their monsters would only get like, fifty years with them? Okay fine I’ve changed my mind. I saw many reviews that said, ‘What’s up with this? It’s fantasy. Let them have their HEA’ and I was like, yeah, that’s true, why am I not letting them just be together for, like, ever? I have the power to do this. (Insert gif of He-Man raising his Power Sword up high.)

It was so much fun revisiting these two. It’s made me want to write a sickeningly cute series of Wyn and Danny adventures where they just get up to stuff and wallow in their love for each other. For four thousand years.

In case it wasn’t blindingly obvious from this novella, I am kind of addicted to writing about that sweet, familiar intimacy that comes after all the initial excitement has settled. Like, when you see someone at their most unguarded and realise they don’t even think twice about being vulnerable around you anymore. That’s where Danny and Wyn are now and I freaking —LOVE—IT.

Also, I need to stop writing side characters who I then immediately want to write entire books for. Orlith—obviously. That bratty thief telyth who pines for Wyn and is *super* jealous of Danny. Ara and Hag. (Two giant monstrous god-like beings fuck-fighting? Uh. *Yes.* Because all those loud, thunderous sounds that shake the land are *definitely* from them “trying to kill each other”, right? Right.)

What’s next?
Next up is Book Four in the Monstrous series. It’s our naïve, glass-half-full boy Rig from the Nebraska raider camp, off trying to free the big cage-headed dude and the other monsters being held by Collector Mary. There is

some overlap here with Book Three, so we'll get to see a little of Aury and Ghost's burgeoning relationship through Rig's eyes. Cute!

Also, I know you guys want to see Danny and Wyn interacting with other characters in this world. Don't worry—they will be. I'm just not telling you when.

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Monster Index

Telyth [*tell*-ith]: One of the old races, known as Soul Eaters. Only seven remaining, including Wyn and Orlith. Humanoid, single-gender species that is born from eggs. Has the ability to dissipate into thick black smoke; can travel great distances this way. This ability is obstructed by behamots, whose rock-like skin sends vibrations that prevent dissipation. A species that does not need to eat, drink or sleep.

Appearance: Tall, rangy muscular build. Pale, greyish white skin. Black, curling horns that have jagged edges. Prominent brow bone and flat, bridgeless nose; sharp cheekbones. Thin, raised ridges across the curves of the forehead and cheekbones. Very sharp teeth.

Wyn is completely covered, head to toe, in scars. He has one pure black eye that can see death, and one that is white with just a tiny pinprick of a pupil. Long black hair. Black-stained fingertips. He typically wears heavy black boots, black pants, a loose black shirt and a long, grey coat with a ragged hem and a hood that conceals his face. 015 at the military's Nebraska base.

Orlith has one pure black eye that can see death, and one that is silver. Long white hair. Black markings extending up past his wrists. His horns are smoother than Wyn's, but have a second jagged spike. He wears a variety of coats; he likes to steal them from the human world, as well as other human items that he hoards in his nest in the monster world. Met by Wyn and Danny in Wyn's novella. Previously had a casual relationship with Wyn; was hoping Wyn would want to have babies with him. He's jealous of Danny.

Rycke [reek]: One of the old races, but not long-lived. Humanoid species. 001 at the military's Nebraska base—the first monster specimen the military captures. Feared by almost all other monsters. Described by Edin as 'unfathomably powerful—a dichotomy of unlimited violent rage and a peaceful, gentle nature'. Do not like causing harm, but become unstoppable when pushed to their limit. Fiercely protective by nature. Gain strength with age.

There is only ever one rycke, though there used to be many before they almost wiped themselves out. The rycke has a life seed inside them that gives them life. When the rycke dies, their body nourishes the seed to grow the new rycke. The seed brings with it the memories of the previous ryckes.

Appearance: Huge black, sinewy wings. Barbs on the side of their neck and down their spine. Dark, bird-like feet. Prominent black veins all over their body. Greenish-grey fingernails.

Aury has several scars, including a fairly severe burn scar on the right side of his face, which happened during the fall of the military's Nebraska base. His specimen brand is located beside his left shoulder blade. Until recently, his right wing was ruined, rendering both wings basically useless. He has chin-length, slightly wavy black-green hair. Big black eyes that have pinpricks of colour if you look close enough.

When Ghost is threatened, Aury changes form. This form is around twenty feet tall and his wings have a span of about sixty feet. He has four-foot-long barbs covered in jagged teeth down the length of his spine. Greenish-white skin with thick, raised, prominent black veins. Black talons on his hands and feet. A huge protruding jaw that juts out from his face, like a goblin shark. Giant, sunken black eyes, and a cavity instead of a nose. Basically, he ain't pretty.

He is observed by Danny at the military's Nebraska base in Book One, and mentioned by Edin in Book Two, before finding his human in Book Three.

Isdernuc [*iz*-der-nuck]: One of the old races. Edin's species, but he is the only one left after a rycke killed the rest of the last remaining tribe more than 5,000 years ago, when Edin was still an adolescent. Humanoid species. A species that does not need to eat, drink or sleep.

Appearance: Close to seven feet tall, with six-inch-long horns that curve up over the forehead. Pale lavender coloured skin. Extremely muscular. Long, prehensile tail with sharp tip. Dark purple hair and eyes, which are bigger than a human's and have much bigger irises. Craggy, intense demonic features. Fangs.

Edin wears a black kilt that ends just below the knee, heavy black boots, and a metal pendant on a leather strap around his neck, which is the last remaining item of his pack's that he owns—it is a piece of a metal bowl his mother made. Part of his right horn gets snapped off in Book Two, leaving

the end of it jagged. He doesn't need to sleep, but he likes to—it energises him. 002 at the military's Nebraska base.

Parasite (species name: unknown): A parasitic monster that infects humans. They are the same species as Wyn; he can detect them, so he destroys them to stop them wiping out humanity. Capable of injecting deadly venom through its bite as a defence mechanism when threatened or a nest is attacked.

The life cycle of a parasite is as follows: a hatchling will crawl inside the mouth of an unaware human—usually while they are asleep—and into the digestive system. The human will, at this stage, start feeling somewhat ill as the parasite begins consuming all of the nutrients in the body as it prepares to lay its eggs. Once the eggs are laid in the stomach, the parasite uses its sharp teeth to escape the stomach; it expels a glue-like substance that it uses to 'patch' the tiny tear it has made in the stomach lining so that the host stays alive long enough to incubate the eggs. The parasite will then latch onto the spinal column to control the host's brain activity and keep the host functioning as the eggs incubate. During this time, the parasitic eggs continue to absorb nutrients through their permeable linings, causing the host to lose weight rapidly, weaken and eventually become too ill to function. When the eggs are ready to hatch, the host will expel them from the stomach and die, the parasite dying alongside it. The eggs then hatch and go off in search of new hosts.

Queens live in nests, laying eggs. A queen produces a thick jelly that creates the environment the eggs need to incubate outside of a host. She is normally tended to by worker parasites, which are bigger than normal parasites, and bring the queen food and tend to the eggs when they are ready to hatch, sloughing off the queen's jelly.

Appearance: Full-sized parasites at the end of their life cycle are about the size of a small rabbit. Dark, scaly skin. Twelve legs, thin and spindly and covered in hard bristles. Flat face with wide eyes like a housefly that curve around the sides of its head. Circular mouth with sharp teeth.

The parasite spawn expelled by a host is a thick, grey mucus, with the darker eggs visible. Hatchlings are tiny versions of adult parasites—about the size of a bumblebee.

Worker parasites are bigger—about the size of a small dog.

Queens are huge—car-sized—and shaped more like a tick, with a thinner thorax and a fat, bloated abdomen that is usually swollen with eggs. Two dozen legs with sharp ends that she uses as weapons.

Aytorin [ay-*tohr*-in]: One of the old races. Scholars. Humanoid species. Fairly introverted, with not many left. Speak an ancient language that holds power; knowing an aytorin's true name grants control.

Appearance: Tall and bipedal. Grey, mottled skin.

Encountered in Book Two by Hunter, Edin, Danny and Wyn; and by the Nebraska camp in Book Three. This aytorin is owned by Collector Mary. He is chained to an RV being pulled by two borolesh. He has a cage on his head, and is dragging a huge war hammer.

Baregh [barr-egg]: Humanoid species that are typically employed as guards in the monster world, due to being big and hulking. Big and muscular; pale grey skin and a thick, dark mane of hair that extends down the back.

Observed by Danny and Wyn in the monster world in Wyn's novella. They guard the city of Thinir, including Moric Lor's hyll and public gardens.

Also seen briefly by Hunter in Book Two, at the fighting competition. This one is thickly scarred, chained up, and being forced to fight by another small, wiry species of monster with six arms.

Behamot [*bee*-ya-mott]: Described by Edin as 'tough, but not particularly smart'. Very hard to kill—the only ways of destroying them are to push them off a great height, causing their rock-like skin to shatter, or to set them on fire. A species that eats and sleeps. Meat eaters.

Appearance: Around seven-and-a-half to eight feet tall. Dark grey skin that is pebbled and rough like stone; basically impenetrable and as hard as rock. Squashed face with big tusks jutting up from their lower jaw.

Encountered by Hunter, Charlie, Edin and Wyn in Book Two. Also encountered long, long ago by Edin and Wyn when two behamots were taunting the Soul Eater about squishing his head under a big boulder, and Edin showed up to help—ripping his own arm off in the process.

Borolesh [*bohr*-oh-lesh]: Large, gentle species. Herbivores. Move on all fours. Pale skin the colour of sand that is wrinkled and hairless. Droopy,

sagging faces. Three long, curving horns protruding from their bald heads. Long arms.

Observed in Book Two by Hunter, Edin, Danny and Wyn; encountered by the Nebraska camp in Book Three. Two borolesh are owned by Collector Mary, and they pull her RV across the Wastes.

Caffid [*kaff*-id]: A monster-world creature that lives on the sandy beaches to the north of the Caen an Sin in the monster world. They live buried in the sand and use their white, nerve-like tongues to hunt out critters. They migrate to the ocean to mate every few years.

Appearance: Very large—wide but relatively flat—but very placid. Described by Wyn as "quite ugly". Mottled brown, domed hump of scales on their back that shimmer faint pink. Front flippers that they use to cover themselves in sand. Wide, flat head with tiny white eyes.

Observed by Danny and Wyn in the monster world in Wyn's novella.

Cagin [*cay*-jin]: Muscular, bear-sized monster with dark brown hide that's thick and solid, like armour. Domed, gleaming back that is impenetrable—even bullets can't get through—but its weakness is on its underbelly, if you can stay alive long enough to flip it over. Long head with a split snout. Teeth that grow in every direction. Long, thin eyes. Poor eyesight, excellent sense of smell. Makes a soft warbling sound.

Cagins eat very infrequently, so will stalk the prey they choose for as long as it takes.

Encountered by Ghost and Aury in Book Three, when it is stalking a group of soldiers barricaded in an old house. It runs at the sight of Aury.

Forileun [fohr-*il*-ee-yun]: Invertebrate species. Secretes a poison from its claws that amplifies pain receptors to incapacitate its prey.

Appearance: About seven to eight feet tall on all fours. Four legs that are segmented and covered in hard bristles, ending with small claws that let it grip. Long, thin body (shaped, as Hunter describes, 'like an ear of corn') covered in dark bristles over a shiny exoskeleton. Long, curving neck and low-hanging face. Rectangular, vertical black eyes that wrap over the top of its head. Blunt, thick teeth.

Encountered by Hunter and Charlie in Book Two.

Karik [*kah*-rick]: A creature that looks like a large, land-walking squid, just with more legs that are sturdy, so it can run—fast. Mottled, blueish-purple skin that looks wet. Huge, bulbous eyes and a big mantle. Its beak is a big white protuberance fringed with little teeth. Their suckers can rip skin clean off the muscle. One rips Edin's leg off when he is young, and Wyn comes across him and helps him. This is how they meet.

Encountered by Ghost in Book Three, when one has moved into the military's Nebraska base after the rycke leaves. It chases him, but gets distracted when it is attacked by another monster.

Kerenis [keh-ren-iss]: Creature that hunts and feeds on anything warm and living; constantly searching for meals, which it smothers before consuming. Next to impossible to kill.

Appearance: Black blob-like monster that moves by rolling its body over itself in a constant undulation. Its underbelly is covered in teeth and ringed by thick black fronds that let it sense vibrations and movements from nearby creatures.

Encountered by Danny and Wyn in Book One.

Koleb [*koh*-leb]: Fairly primitive species that travel in big packs via tunnel networks that they dig. Known for their pilgrimages where the tribes meet to offer the best sacrifice to their god, in exchange for plentiful harvests and bountiful young. A species that eats and sleeps. Vegetarian.

Appearance: About four feet tall. Greenish-grey skin. Thin with spiny, hunched backs. Long arms that end with two long, clawed fingers. Long, floppy ears. Big mouths filled with shark-like teeth.

Encountered by Hunter and Charlie in Book Two.

The Mabs: The Mabs, Ara and Hag, are two ancient (more ancient than Wyn), gigantic beings that live in the Caen an Sin in the monster world and witness the sharing of time between lovers. Their "battles" shake the land. Worshipped as gods by most in the monster world, but not by Wyn.

Ara has pure black skin and either wears a white mask or has a face that looks similar to a stag skull, with enormous antlers. He wears blue-gold bands on his biceps and above his knees, and a short, sleeveless tunic made of white leather.

Hag has anaemic white skin and either wears a pure black mask or has a face that looks similar to a wild boar skull, with huge sharp tusks jutting out to the sides. He wears a short black leather kilt, and has strange markings down his shins and the centre of his chest.

Encountered by Danny and Wyn in the monster world in Wyn's novella.

Mortik [*mohr*-tick]: Invertebrate species. Opportunistic hunters that lure their prey in by camouflaging themselves depending on their surroundings. Some have adapted since coming to the human world. Nocturnal.

Appearance: Described by Hunter as a 'cross between a beetle and a scorpion, but the size of a cow'. Six segmented legs. Long tail with extremely sharp stinger that secretes acid-like venom. Head that mimics a human face; small black eyes and open mouth with a long, thin black tongue that it tastes the air with due to poor vision.

Seen briefly by Danny in Book One; encountered by Hunter and Edin in Book Two in the tunnels.

Myrm [muhrm]: Big, worm-like creatures the size of a horse, covered in dark hair. Six short legs. Long, curving neck. Blank face with a wide slit for a mouth and two tiny black holes for eyes.

Observed by Ghost in Book Three, when he and Aury stop at the river after visiting the Topeka camp. Described by Edin to Hunter in Book Two —a myrm is the reason Edin was caught by the military and became specimen 002. He came across one that had been trapped by the military and was freeing it when they tranquilised him.

Nask: A monster-world creature described by Wyn as a "fat, ugly little creature" that engages in the "least enthusiastic mating dance" he's ever seen. They sleep for decades at a time.

Appearance: Squat, round bodies and stubby limbs. A disproportionately small head with bulbous eyes. Black, leathery skin with deep red markings that hint at their age, and a bright red underbelly. Moves with a jerky, back-and-forth walk.

Mentioned by Wyn, and observed by Danny and Wyn in the monster world in Wyn's novella. Danny wants to keep one as a pet. Wyn says no.

Rosir [*row*-seer]: A bug-like, monster-world creature with fluffy white wings.

Observed by Danny and Wyn in the monster world in Wyn's novella.

Salyik [*sal*-yick]: Humanoid species that live in the monster-world city of Thinir, but are relegated to the poorer areas close to the city's ports because they are the minority. Treated poorly by other citizens. Quiet and tall.

Observed by Wyn and Danny in the monster world in Wyn's novella. We may have also met another salyik at some point. Maybe. Who knows?

Usho [*ooh*-show]: A monster-world species that is described by Wyn as "boring and logic-driven", which makes them good business owners (no offence to business owners—that's just Wyn's opinon). They tend to reside in cities, and are a dominant species in the city of Thinir in the monster world. Keep to themselves and have no natural predators due to tasting very bad. Somewhat arrogant.

Appearance: Bumpy, grey-green skin. Bulbous eyes. Thick necks and very wide mouths with lots of blunt, crowded teeth.

Encountered by Wyn and Danny in the monster world in Wyn's novella, several times. They are all very rude to Danny, so Wyn gets, ahem, protective.

Vint: Humanoid species that is dominant in the monster-world city of Thinir. Dark skin. Big, pointed ears that tend to be pierced and grow with age—their ears can get so large that they flop over. Long fingers, sharp teeth and elfin features. Sharp-tongued and combative. Keen botanists.

Moric Lor, who runs the corner of the world that Danny and Wyn visit in Wyn's novella, is a vint. He lives in a hyll—like a palace—at the top of the city and grows a vast garden of deadly plants in his public gardens.

Encountered by Wyn and Danny in the monster world in Wyn's novella. Observed by Danny in Book One—specimen 014 at the military's Nebraska base is a female vint with white hair. Seen briefly by Hunter in Book Two, pacing in a cage at the fighting competition.

Wanuk [wah-nuk]: A monster-world creature, about the size of a small pig, that resembles a large naked mole rat but with a beak instead of teeth, and six long, thin legs that end in sharp points.

Edin hunts one for Hunter and Charlie at the homestead in Book Two, but they decline to eat it. Wyn catches one in the monster world in his novella, to feed the soldier on his test-run.

Unknown: Thin, bony monster that is hairless and a deep burgundy colour. Head shaped like a blank teardrop on its side, a smooth round skull thinning to a sharp point for a snout. Two small black eyes. Four spindly legs that end in two tiny claws, similar to a tarantula's tarsal claws. Makes a strange chittering noise when it's excited.

Encountered by the Nebraska camp in Book Three. One is the domesticated pet of Collector Mary. It sleeps in her RV and enjoys being carried in her arms like a baby. It apparently tries to eat Cutter's hand when Ghost and Aury are away from the camp, which causes all kinds of problems.

Unknown: Extremely tall monster covered in pale hair, with arms so long they drag on the ground. Fairly aggressive.

Encountered by Ghost in Book Three, when one distracts the karik that is chasing him, giving him the chance to escape.

Unknown: Short, wide female monster with yellowish-green, wet-looking skin. Lightbulb-shaped head with no discernible neck. Four long arms that end in three thick, tentacle-like fingers. Long, thick, dark green, rope-like strands protruding from her head that move independently. Flat face; thin lips and no nose—just two slitted nostrils. Long, thin eyes with horizontal pupils.

Encountered by Hunter and Edin in Book Two; one of them mans the sign-up table at the fighting competition. She hits on Edin and Hunter gets bratty about it.

Unknown: Tall, gangly monster with 'freakishly long' limbs (according to Hunter) with an extra joint. Covered in coarse brown hair.

Encountered by Hunter and Edin in Book Two; one of them guards the front prison entrance where the fighting competition is held. Nosy. Bit of a creep.

Unknown: Humanoid species. Tall, hulking monster with leathery tan skin that's hairy in places. Thick, clawed fingers. Beady black eyes. Big tusks that distort his lower lip.

Encountered by Hunter and Edin in Book Two; he is the lover of the fightmaster at the fighting competition.

Unknown: Tall, wispy pale monster, dressed in long dark robes. Moves like it is almost floating. Long fingers. Featureless face except for two small dark eyes.

Seen briefly by Hunter in Book Two, at the fighting competition. It is the owner of the human fighter who Charlie goes up against.

Unknown: Troll-looking creature. Pebbled, mustard-colour skin.

Seen briefly by Hunter in Book Two, at the fighting competition. It is the owner of the human fighter who Hunter has to fight.

Unknown: 008 at the military's Nebraska base. Described by Danny as 'the stuff of literal nightmares'. Skin like old leather. Long arms and fingers; hands with extra knuckles. Rows of solid black and white eyes that ring the entire front half of its head, blinking sporadically. Gaping mouth crowded with needle-sharp teeth.

Observed by Danny in Book One. It appeared to be in agony and constantly raging in its cell before it vanished one day under classified circumstances.

Unknown: 007 at the military's Nebraska base. Tall, slender humanoid species. Non-gender-specific. Pale grey. Angular yet flat face with alien-like features and big dark eyes.

Observed by Danny in Book One, standing in the centre of their cell, unmoving.

Unknown: Female monster species. Sunburnt red skin. Long arms and legs. Small, open ring of tentacles for a mouth. Two thin slits for nostrils. Circular black and white eyes.

Encountered by Danny in Book One, as the leader of the small pack that try to take Danny. Destroyed by Wyn.

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Monster World Flora

The monster world has black grass with reddish tips; dark earth; rocks in deep muted colours; and glowing blue and purple crystals that form in the water. The sky is a pale pink during the day that deepens to red closer to the horizon; it turns black at night, with twin moons.

The tear that leads to the US is located in a valley in the monster world, close to Wyn's nest, in a fairly empty part of the world known unofficially as the wild lands.

Dalgit bush: An incredibly toxic plant with brown leaves feathered with orange spines. Its fruit are bright orange, pearl-like berries that grow in long, thin clusters up tall stems, and are caustic. According to Wyn, they will "eat through your guts".

Dros tree: Carnivorous plant with long tendrils that trail from the branches to the ground, covered in a sticky dew-like substance, to trap critters that crawl too close to its trunk. The tendril then slowly curls up around the critter to ingest it.

Himic flower: Huge, bright blooms that glitter in the sun in various shades of orange and red. They have deep burgundy pollen that burns the throat like acid when it is disturbed and inhaled. Observed by Danny and Wyn in Moric Lor's public gardens in the city of Thinir.

Hona plant: Carnivorous. A large, black-red ball covered in white protrusions that open and close rhythmically to mimic the wings of a rosir big to attract prey. It sits on a giant black lily pad-looking base, that has hooks that emerge when triggered by pressure. Tendrils will then emerge from the base of the plant to draw its prey into the centre of the ball to digest it.

Layth vine: Gigantic plants found growing from the hot springs in the Zoli Basin. They have electric pink flowers that, according to Danny, look like

sweet pea and smell sweet. The plants become crystallised from the minerals in the hot pools as they grow, which is why they get so massive.

Lyteg tree and fruit: An abundant monster-world fruit tree with edible drupes that have bumpy, warty, purplish-brown skin, a smooth, purple pit and juicy, pale purple flesh that—according to Danny—tastes like a peach crossed with a blueberry. Edin's species—isdernucs—lived in forests with lots of these trees before they were all wiped out except for him.

Marast tree: A small tree used decoratively in establishments in the city of Thinir. Its trunk is narrow, but covered in thick thorns that stop small creatures climbing it to reach its fruit. Thankfully, it's not toxic, because Danny grabs onto one when he trips.

Moros vine: A very large plant species that is toxic, and is grown by Moric Lor's gardeners in his deadly garden in the city of Thinir.

Otya bush and fruit: A bush native to the area where the tear is located, and Wyn lives. The fruit grows in fat bunches; they are large, round berries that have speckled, deep green skin and firm, dark green flesh. According to Danny, they taste like figs.

Phorim reed: Reeds that grow along the edges of marshes. Tall, slender and pale with tufts of fluffy dark fibres that sprout from its top. Danny definitely does not look like one.

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Monster World Locations

Caen an Sin: A huge fortress located in the Yawning Sea, in a remote part of the monster world where the land is very hilly, which people believe is it trying to escape the “thunderous anger” of the mabs, who live there. Made of the blackest black stone that sucks up the light, with a reddish sheen, and is covered in ornate, ancient carvings of the old races.

Thinir: A port city located on the coast to the north of the Caen an Sin, and north-east of Wyn’s tear in the wild lands. A compact, affluent city where the Moric—the ruler—lives in a hyll, like a palace, at the very top. The city is located on a large ridge that overlooks the sea, so its streets are very steep and staggered. The dominant species that live here are vints and usho, with a repressed community of salyik living in the poorest parts near the port.

The layout of the city largely comprises stone steps, narrow walkways, and bridge networks, with stone buildings built on top of one another. It has an open-air market near the city gates to lure in tourists.

At the very top of the city is the Moric’s hyll and his public gardens, where he keeps a vast array of the deadliest plants in the monster world.

Wyn’s Valley: Not its official name, as much as he would probably like it to be. Wyn’s tear to the US is located in a remote corner of the monster world, specifically in a deep valley in the wild lands. The land around the valley is largely flat. The sharp peaks of the Arin Mountains are visible to the north. To the east is the Yawning Sea, where the Caen an Sin is located. North-east is the city of Thinir.

Zoli Basin: A great basin with a craggy ridge that descends into a sharp drop, filled with glowing blue-purple hot pools ringed in copper and red. Giant crystals emerge from the pool edges, as well as layth vines which become crystallised as they grow.

The basin is believed by some—not Wyn—to be the footprint from a race of ancient, god-like and gigantic creatures who are long extinct. The hot springs in the basin are a sacred place for most—but not Wyn—and are

believed to bring health and vitality. The pools' crystallised layth flowers are a black market product.

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About the Author

Lily Mayne writes what she loves to read: achingly sweet yet gritty romances against unusual backdrops—dark, futuristic, dystopian and more. She enjoys reading and writing (duh), baking, watching terrible horror movies and many other hobbies that would have potentially made her an ideal Victorian maid. Just a really lazy one.

She currently lives in the UK with her husband and several fluffballs, who like to make a lot of noise while she's writing.

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